

# Church Etiquette

## Standing vs. Sitting

Every local church in America has developed its own customs concerning standing and sitting during Services. The usual and Traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church is **standing**. In most churches in “the old country” there are usually no pews. Chairs or benches were sometimes placed along the perimeter of the church allow the elderly and/or infirm to sit. Since chairs are part of our local practice some people get confused about when to sit or stand.

First of all, it is fully acceptable (and even preferable) to stand throughout the entire Service. If you prefer this, please be considerate of where you choose to stand so that you do not intentionally block another's view. Also, when in church, you should never turn your back on the Altar (unless you are leaving the church).

When should we **definitely stand**? **Always** stand during the incensing of the church, at the Gospel reading, the Small and Great Entrances, the Anaphora and Consecration of the Holy Gifts, during the distribution of Holy Communion, whenever a priest gives a blessing and during the Dismissal.

If you absolutely need to sit during these parts of the Divine Liturgy, by all means do so. It is better to sit than to risk an accident because of weakness or illness.

## Kneeling / Prostrating

Some people have a practice of kneeling or prostrating during certain portions of the Divine Liturgy. On Sundays, often referred to as “a little Pascha” when we commemorate the Lord's Resurrection, kneeling in **penitence** is not appropriate. However, it is always appropriate to kneel in **reverence and awe** (except during the Paschal season, from Pascha to Pentecost). In the tradition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, we kneel or prostrate during the *Epiclesis* (from “Your own of Your own, we offer unto

You, on behalf of all and for all” through “Especially for our Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed and Glorious Lady, the Birthgiver-of-God and Ever- Virgin Mary”) and during the Lord’s Prayer.

Please be considerate of others’ piety and practices, but when in doubt, stand. It is never wrong to stand in church.

### **Lighting Candles**

Lighting candles is an important part of Orthodox worship. We light them as we pray, making an offering to accompany our prayers. Orthodox typically light candles when coming into the church - and that is usually the best time to light them, but there are times when candles should not be lit. It is not proper to light candles during the Epistle or Gospel readings, during the Small or Great Entrances, the sermon, and most of the times when the faithful are standing. If you find yourself arriving to church after the Divine Liturgy has begun, a good rule of thumb to remember is - if everyone is standing, wait until they are sitting to light a candle (unless they are sitting for the sermon, of course). Other than that it is probably all right to light a candle.

### **Entering the Church (Late)**

The time to arrive at church is 5-10 minutes before the priest begins the Service. When you arrive at church all pagers or cell phones should be either turned off or placed on a silent setting so as to not interrupt the Service.

Certainly we have all had “one of those mornings”, and occasionally we might arrive after the Service has begun. But, for some unknown reason (simply a bad habit), some people actually *plan* on arriving at church late! This is disrespectful not only to those who have arrived on time, but, more importantly, to God Himself.

If you do arrive late to Divine Liturgy, please enter quietly and observe what is happening. If the Epistle or Gospel is being read or the Small or Great Entrance is taking place, remain standing where you are, make the sign of the cross, then find a seat quickly upon their conclusion. If Father

is giving the sermon, remain in the back of the church until he is completed, then find a seat. You may venerate the icon in the center of the church, but refrain from lighting candles and venerating icons in the front of the church as it is disruptive.

Try to enter the church in a reverent manner, not drawing unnecessary attention to yourself. That is to say, your entrance should not be the time to meet and greet everyone- stay for coffee hour to do that.

The best way to avoid this problem is to arrive on time - then you don't have to wonder if it's OK to come in or not. One should refrain from receiving Holy Communion if you enter the church after the reading of the Holy Gospel.

## **Posture**

Since American churches have largely adopted pews or chairs, sitting during parts of the Service has become acceptable. However, when we sit, do we realize that we are also sending a message to God as well? When seated we should have both feet on the floor and our backs against the back of the chair. There should **never** be any slouching or crossing of legs at anytime in church.

In some Orthodox cultures, crossing one's legs is taboo and considered to be very disrespectful. In our American culture, while there are no real taboos concerning crossing of one's legs, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable when sitting. We should not cross our legs in church- not because it is "wrong", but rather because it is too casual and too relaxed for being in church.

Think about it - when you get settled in your favorite chair at home, you often lean back, cross your legs and let your mind wander where it may. But remember, sitting down in church is a concession and a privilege, it is not the normative method of prayer. You surely don't want your mind to wander off too much. In fact, if you do sit, you should sit attentively with feet on the floor, ready to stand at attention (which is what "Let us stand aright" means).

Also, when standing you should do so with your back straight (or as straight as possible) and with your hands at your sides, **not** in your pockets. Do not stand with your arms folded over your chest, or your hands on your hips – this is considered disrespectful and rude.

### **In and Out**

On some Sundays, it almost seems like we have a revolving door in the back of the church – and it is used by both children and adults. Use the restroom before coming into church. You shouldn't need to get a drink of water during the Service (especially if you are taking Communion!). Don't come to church to go to the fellowship hall – come to pray!

Taking restless little ones out is a different matter. If a child is disruptive, take him/her quickly and quietly out of church, just long enough to settle him/her down, then return to the Service. Follow the rules for entering late: not during readings, sermons, or Entrances.

### **Leaving Before Dismissal**

Leaving church before the Dismissal - besides being rude - deprives us of a blessing. Worship has a beginning ("Blessed is the Kingdom...") and an end ("Let us depart in peace..."). We live in a fast-paced world where we seem to be hurrying from place to place. But in God's presence, we need to make every attempt to fight this pressure to move on to the next thing on the day's agenda, treating church like just another meeting or social appointment. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God's holiness. Stay in church and thank God for His precious gifts.

### **"...and there was wailing and great lamentation..."**

This refers not only to the events of Holy Friday, but also to some of our children who are being challenged to grow in their faith. This may also refer to some of the parents as well, especially if a child does not feel well and the Service is one of the longer ones of the liturgical year. So what do we do to encourage and support our parents and children during these

tough times? Everyone has had “one of those days”, so that means that everyone can relate to this situation- parents should not be left alone to deal with a child having a rough day. Sometimes a child responds better when another adult steps in to assist and comfort the child, whether inside, or, for a brief period, outside.

At no time is threatening, hitting or otherwise “punishing” a child for their inability to remain focused and attentive throughout an entire Service appropriate. Many adults can't remain attentive throughout an entire Service and they aren't punished! It is all part of spiritual development. The more you encourage the child to be involved in the Service, for example, through lighting candles (with appropriate supervision), singing with the congregation, venerating icons and taking Communion, the more the child will look forward to their time in church, as opposed to something that is forced upon them as some kind of discipline.

*Parents* - Look after your children. Know where they are and who they are with at all times. Support one another as you experience different challenges of “growth spurts”. Remember, you are NOT the only one who has ever gone through this. Encourage your children to pick up after themselves, and if they are too young, clean up their messes. Keep in mind that you are in God's house and He is not going to clean up after your children for you. God wants all of His children present in His house always. Parents should NEVER feel as though they can't bring their children to church. You have a very special and unique ministry as parents. It is just as important for your spiritual growth that you attend Services as it is for your child's. At the same time, if your child is being especially loud or disruptive, do not ignore them, but, out of consideration for others, take them out of the church for a short time to settle them down. We are most blessed to have many young, wonderful children in our parish, but please do not allow them to become the focus of attention- in the church that place is reserved for God alone.

*SNACKS* - children 0-3 years old may need to have small snacks like crackers, juice, Cheerios, etc. during a Service, but it should not be an all out meal, nor should the evidence be left for everyone to see what they were snacking on. By the time they are 4 - 5 years old, children should be able to go through the Divine Liturgy without eating anything. By the time they reach 7 - 8 years old, they should begin fasting on Sunday morning for Communion (or at least make an attempt at fasting by cutting

back on the amount or type of breakfast, and eating “fasting” type foods - you may want to talk to Father about this). For children who do get snacks, please don't feed them while in line for Holy Communion (this applies to holy bread as well). They need to approach the chalice without food in their mouths. Chewing gum is not permitted for children or adults.

*TOYS* – this is church, NOT daycare or play school. It is understandable that young children may want to bring something with them to church. When choosing an appropriate toy, please be sure that does not squeak, beep or rattle. Usually a small stuffed animal, a doll, or an appropriate book is best, and should be limited to one item. Items such as coloring books, crayons, action figures, cars and the like generally lead to more distraction.

### **Blot that Lipstick!**

Have you ever looked at an icon in just the right light and seen the lip prints all over it? Not very pretty, is it? Lipstick may look fine on lips, but it looks horrible on icons, crosses, the Communion spoon and the priest's or bishop's hand. Icons have been ruined by lipstick; and even though the cross can usually be cleaned after everyone venerates it, it just isn't considerate to others to impose your lipstick on them. What is the answer? If you insist on wearing lipstick to church, blot your lips well before venerating an icon, taking Communion, or kissing the cross or the priest's or bishop's hand. Even better, wait until after church to put it on. After all, God is not impressed with how attractive you look externally – your makeup or clothing – but how attractive you are internally, your adornment with good works and piety.

### **Talking in Church**

Isn't it great to see friends and family in church? Just wait until coffee hour to get the latest news from them. It is not necessary to have a “receiving line” form as you enter church and take your place, especially if Services have already started. Besides being disrespectful toward God, it is rude to the other people in church who are trying to worship. Try talking to God while in church through your prayers, hymns and

thanksgiving, and talk to your friends and meet the guests and visitors afterwards during coffee hour.

### **Venerating Icons**

When you enter the church, it is traditional to venerate the icons. Usually there are icons at the entrance to the church and many churches have icon stands in the front as well. When venerating (kissing) an icon, pay attention to where you kiss. It is not proper to kiss an icon on the face. You wouldn't go up and kiss the Lord or His mother on the lips, would you? You should kiss an Image of our Lord on His feet, and if His feet are not seen in the icon, kiss His hand. The saints should be kissed on their hands. Pay attention to what you are doing! As you venerate an icon, show proper respect to the person depicted in the icon – the same respect you would show the person if they were physically there with you. Refrain from venerating icons in the front of the church if Services have already started when you enter. And remember, blot off your lipstick before kissing.

### **Kiss (Don't Shake) the Priest's or Bishop's Hand**

Did you know that the proper way to greet a priest or bishop is to ask for his blessing and kiss his right hand? How do you do this? Approach the priest or bishop with your right hand over your left hand and say "Father (or "Master" in the case of the bishop), bless." He will make the sign of the cross, and place his right hand over yours. This is much more appropriate (and traditional) than shaking their hands. After all, the priest or bishop is not just "one of the boys." When you kiss their hands, you show respect for their office – they are the ones who "bless and sanctify" you and who offer the Holy Gifts on your behalf. St. John Chrysostom said that, if you were to meet an angel and a priest walking down the street together, you should first ask the priest for his blessing, and kiss his hand, even before greeting the angel, for the priest's hands handle the very Body of Christ God. So the next time you greet your priest or bishop, don't shake his hand, ask for his blessing.

## Sunday Dress

Remember the time when people put on their “Sunday best” to go to church? In fact, dress clothes were often referred to as Sunday clothes. In some parts of the country, this is not common today. In fact, all too often, dress in church has become too casual. In **all** areas of our lives, we should offer Christ our **best**. And the same is true of our dress. We should offer Christ something more than what we wear while doing yard work. And we should dress modestly, not in a flashy way that would bring attention to ourselves. Our dress should always be becoming of a Christian - especially at church. Here are some specific guidelines we use in our parishes:

*Children:* Only young children (under 10) should wear shorts to church – and then only dress shorts. Athletic shorts, cut-offs, and spandex shorts are **never** appropriate church wear (for children or adults!). Shoes or sandals should be clean and tied. No one should wear T-shirts with any kind of writing on them.

*Women:* Dresses should be modest. No tank tops or dresses with only straps at the shoulders, no short skirts (mini-skirts), and no skin-tight dresses. Dresses should have backs and not be cut low in the front. If women wear pants to church, they should be dress pants (not jeans, leggings, etc.). Shorts of any type are not appropriate for church. While, for the most part, no longer practiced in America, it is Traditional for women to pray in the church with a covering (hat, scarf, etc.) on their heads.

*Men:* Men should also dress modestly. While coat and tie are not mandatory, shirts should have collars and be buttoned to the collar (the actual collar button may be left undone, but two or three buttons undone is inappropriate). Slacks should be cleaned and pressed. Jeans (of any color) or sweat pants are too casual for church, especially ones with patches or holes. Again, shorts are not appropriate church wear. If you’re going somewhere after church where you need to dress casually, bring a change of clothing with you and change after coffee hour. Remember, use your best judgment and good taste when dressing for church. After all, you don’t go to be seen by everyone else – you go to meet and worship God.

## To Cross or Not To Cross

Anyone who has looked around on a Sunday morning will notice that different people cross themselves at different times (and sometimes in different ways). To a certain extent, when to cross oneself is according to personal piety and not an issue of dogma. But there are times when it is specifically proper to cross yourself, and times when you should not. Here is a brief list of when to cross and when not to cross:

*To Cross:* When you hear one of the variations of the phrase, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”; at the beginning and end of the Liturgical Service or your private prayers; entering or exiting the church, when passing in front of the Holy Altar; before venerating in icon, the cross, or Gospel book.

*Not to Cross:* At the chalice before or after receiving Communion (you might hit the chalice with your hand); when the priest blesses with his hand saying, “Peace be with you all” – bow slightly and receive the blessing (when the priest blesses with the cross, or whenever the bishop blesses, it is appropriate to cross yourself); when receiving a personal blessing from a bishop or a priest (kissing the right hand of the bishop or priest is appropriate, but not making the sign of the cross).

## Handling the Holy Bread

After taking Holy Communion, and at the end of the Liturgy, it is traditional to eat a piece of holy bread or *antidoron* – the bread that was left over after the preparation of the Holy Gifts (the *Proskomidia* Service). While antidoron is not Holy Communion, it is blessed bread, and, as such, should be eaten carefully so that crumbs don’t fall all over the place. After taking Communion or kissing the cross at the end of the Divine Liturgy, take some of the antidoron, and when you return to your seat or get to a place where you can stop for a moment, eat the bread, trying not to drop crumbs. If you want to give a piece to someone else, go ahead and take an extra piece – don’t break yours in half (it produces too many crumbs). And please monitor your children as they take the antidoron, teaching them to eat it respectfully.

## **The Great Entrance**

Many people like to touch the hem of the priest's *phelon* (outer garment) as he processes during the Great Entrance. This is a nice, pious custom by which people “attach their personal prayers” to the prayers of the Entrance with the Holy Gifts. At the same time, be careful not to grab too hard and trip up the Great Entrance, nor push people out of the way in the process.

## **Holy Communion**

Receiving Holy Communion is the ultimate blessing one can receive during the course of the Divine Liturgy. Why doesn't everyone partake? Well, according to the Canons (universal guidelines) of the Orthodox Church, only baptized, chrismated Orthodox Christians, who have properly prepared themselves through prayer, confession and fasting may receive Holy Communion. While there are many cultural practices as to how one prepares and how often one receives the Holy Mysteries, it is understood that regular participation (i.e. weekly) in the reception of Holy Communion is the norm for most churches in America.

If you are visiting another church, be sure that you contact the local priest, if you are unknown to him. Don't just assume that you will be given Holy Communion. You may even be required to present a letter from your pastor indicating that you are an active Orthodox Christian. That pastor may indicate that you must conform to their parish's practice of prayer and fasting prior to receiving Holy Communion. This is why it is important for you to first introduce yourself to the priest (state your name, your parish, your bishop's name and the name of your parish priest).

When you approach the chalice to receive Holy Communion, you should do so with the utmost reverence, silently (no chit chat), with your arms or hands crossed right over left, across your chest. State your name for the priest (especially if you are visiting another parish) and open your mouth wide enough that the priest doesn't accidentally spill the contents of the holy spoon. Our parish practice includes venerating the base of the chalice prior to moving to partake of the antidoron, but do not walk away before the priest has said “Amen”.

## **A Final Thought**

American culture and society is very casual in its approach to life. Don't allow this prevailing attitude to enter into your Orthodox Christian piety! If it has, NOW is the time to re-visit your level of understanding and commitment to Christ and His Church. There are plenty of other areas that could be included here or covered more thoroughly. Most church etiquette is largely based upon common sense and showing respect for God and others. Always remember that you are in church to worship God, the Holy Trinity. The priest says, "With the fear (awe) of God, with faith and love draw near." Let this be the way in which you approach every aspect of Christian life, as well as church worship. If you practice these things, the unruly behavior of the past will simply be that, THE PAST.

Let us all, as God's family, with our priests and bishops as Christ's representatives, as the fathers in the local church families, begin to take God's things more seriously, by showing the proper respect and reverence for His worship. Let us all embark upon a "more spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing those things that are well pleasing unto God."

This article was adapted by Fr. Gregory Czumak for local parish use at Four Evangelists Orthodox Church, Bel Air, MD, from an article published in *The Word* magazine in January 1997 by Fr. David Barr.