

*A Booklet
on
Church Etiquette*



*Holy Trinity Orthodox Church
Willimantic, Connecticut*

Church Etiquette

Standing vs. Sitting

The traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church, as well as at home, has historically been to stand. Within the Orthodox practice, church discipline is closely linked to spiritual awareness and can often lead to a deeper understanding of the church's rich spiritual life. The use of pews for instance in the Orthodox Church, is a relatively recent development and has certainly been greatly influenced by our Western culture. Their use can promote spiritual laziness if not used discriminately. In many Orthodox countries, there are no pews. Chairs or benches on the side walls are usually reserved for those who are frail, elderly, pregnant mothers, and those who are sick. It is understandable if small children sit as well, depending of course on their ability and strength. Sitting during Old Testament readings, psalmody, and other periods of long readings is considered an acceptable time to rest.

Since the 15th century in North America, there has been a tendency to build churches with pews; and since we have them, we need to figure out when we may sit and when we should stand. This has always been an area of great concern amongst our Orthodox faithful. Please know that it is fully acceptable, and even preferable, to stand throughout services. Standing reflects a type of active participation and reflects a desired reverence for the Person of Christ. If you prefer this, it would be better to find a place closer to the back or side of the church so as not to stand out or block someone's view. His Grace, Bishop Nikolai. Bishop of Sitka, Anchorage and Alaska, has offered his own thoughts on this subject.

"We must strive to get back on our feet in order to pray and give glory to Almighty God, being mindful that in church we are standing in His presence," His Grace has written. "My dear children at the Second Coming we will be crawling and begging God to accept us into His Heavenly Kingdom. It is in the church where this reality is most profound. We are standing before His throne, along physically, but surrounded by the saints and angels who hold us up."

This small booklet is intended to provide a general outline on what the Orthodox Church discipline should look like at Holy Trinity. It is not intended to be inclusive at all, but provides a brief overview which will give our parish a more consistent appearance between all worshippers during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. All of which is done in the church should be done in a spirit of reverence with the sense that one is standing in the presence of God, the angels, and all the saints.

When should one definitely stand?

- a) Stand at the beginning of Divine Liturgy when the priest elevates the Holy Gospel and exclaims, "*Blessed is the King of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...*"
- b) Always during the Gospel reading. Stand when the priest exclaims, "*Amen. Wisdom. Let us Attend. Let us listen to the Holy Gospel ...*" The reading of God's Holy Word, so in many respects it is as if our Lord is present with us at that very moment. If Christ were to enter into our Church today, we would stand out of respect. Definitely stand during the Gospel reading. Sit during the sermon.
- c) The Little Entrance (Procession with the Gospel) and the Great Entrances (Procession with the Holy Gifts). These entrances are accompanied by acolytes holding candles and icons.
- d) Stand for The Anaphora and Consecration of the Holy Gifts. Many choose to remain standing for this point through the remainder of the Divine Liturgy.
- e) To stand during the distribution of Holy Communion to the faithful is a sign of respect for Christ's physical presence in the Eucharist.
- f) Stand whenever the priest gives a blessing ("*Peace be unto all*").
- g) Stand for The Dismissal Prayer.

Arriving on Time

The time to arrive at church is always before the service starts. It allows time for lighting candles and venerating icons, in addition to

warming the heart for prayer. Quieting the heart is an essential condition for prayer. When entering the church, cross yourself, and make the sign of the cross upon your breast before venerating each icon. Arriving late for the beginning of worship services is a bad habit that must be broken. Late arrivers are asked to enter the church quietly and observe what is happening. If the Epistle or Gospel is being read, or the Little or Great Entrance is taking place, wait until it is finished to quickly find a seat. If Father is preaching the sermon, stay in the back until he has concluded. Try not to interrupt the Liturgy when you enter.

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 people 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 Little or Great Entrances, the sermon, and most of the times when the faithful are standing. If you find yourself arriving to church after the 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 fine to light a candle.

Venerating Icons

When entering 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. Parishes that follow the Slavic tradition usually place the icons on a table (the *tetrapod*) in front of the *solea/ambo*, the elevated area in front of the icon screen. When venerating an icon, pay attention to what part of the icon is being kissed. It is not proper to kiss an icon in the face, nor for example is it appropriate to kiss the donkey on the Palm Sunday icon. Kiss the gospel, scroll, or hand cross in the hand of the person

in the icon, or kiss the hand or foot of the person depicted. As you venerate and icon, show proper respect, the same respect you would show the person by venerating him or her in an appropriate place.

Entering the Altar

When any male enters into the altar, the appropriate action is to enter through the north Deacon's doors, cross oneself, and make a prostration in the direction of the altar table itself. The altar is the visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Prostrations are not made from the time of Pascha through the Feast of Holy Pentecost.

Making the Sign of the 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:

When to Make the Sign of the Cross

1. Whenever you feel the need
2. Before and after any prayers
3. When you enter and leave the Narthex and Nave
4. Before you kiss an Icon, Cross, or the Gospel Book
5. When you pass the Altar
6. When any of the following phrases is offered;
 - a) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
 - b) Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Have Mercy on Us
 - c) At any prayerful invocation or blessing of God
7. After the reading of the Epistle or Gospel

8. Near the end of the Creed at the phrase In One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church
9. Before and after the Consecration during the Divine Liturgy (when the Priest says 'Your Own of Your Own we offer You, In every way and for every Thing'. This is the point when the Priest prays with the people for God to make the Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.
10. At the end of the Lord's Prayer while the Priest says 'For Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen'
11. Before and after receiving Holy Communion
12. Before receiving Antidoron (The blessed bread at the end of the service).

Let us Bow Our Heads

It is customary to bow the head or bow from the waist at certain moments during liturgical worship. The sign of the cross is not typically made at these times.

- a) When the Priest exclaims, "Peace be unto all"
 - b) At the Exclamation, "Bow your heads unto the Lord"
 - c) When the Priest gives a hand blessing
 - d) When the Priest censes the people
 - e) When the Priest bows toward the faithful during the services, and
 - f) During the Great Entrance in reverence for the Holy Gifts.
 - 9) When the Priest exclaims, "Peace be unto all"
 - h) At the Exclamation, "Bow your heads unto the Lord"
 - i) When the Priest gives a hand blessing
 - .j) When the Priest censes the people
 - k) When the Priest bows toward the faithful during the services, and
- During the Great Entrance in reverence for the Holy Gifts

Crossing One's Legs

In some Orthodox cultures, crossing one's legs is inappropriate and considered to be very disrespectful. In our North American culture, while there are no real taboos concerning crossing one's legs, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable while sitting. Crossing one's legs presents a casual appearance — to relaxed for being in church — and should be avoided. When you get settled in your favorite chair at home, you lean back, cross your legs, and then your mind can wander anywhere it wants to. Remember that sitting in church is a concession, not the normative way of prayer. You surely don't want to get too relaxed and let your mind wander. In fact, when you do sit in church, you should sit attentively - and not too comfortably. When sitting in church, feet should be kept on the floor ready to stand at attention (this is what "Let us attend" means). Make the sign of the cross upon your breast, but don't cross your legs.

Fasting

According to the long-standing Orthodox practice, all who approach Holy Communion on a regular basis are expected to keep — at the very minimum — a meat fast during the church's four prescribed fasting periods (Great Lent, Advent, Dormition Fast in August, Apostles Fast), in addition to mostly every Wednesday and Friday with just a few exceptions, most notably the week immediately after the Lord's Nativity, Bright Friday, and the Friday of the Publican & Pharisee. Nothing should pass our lips from 12:00AM the previous night. Most Orthodox have been raised within this particular restraint, and this exercise in spiritual discipline must be maintained. Fasting must be accompanied by fervent prayer. Prayer without fasting is dead. For those who have combined prayer with fasting, they are very familiar and thankful for the rich spiritual fruits the combined disciplines make.

In the early church if a person were to miss Divine Liturgy on three successive Sundays, they were expected to come to Holy Confession before once again approaching the Life-Giving Sacrament. If one has

been away from Liturgy for several weeks, they are asked to be mindful of this early church practice, and plan accordingly if reception at our Lord's Banquet is desired. No one is ever truly worthy to receive Christ's Body and Blood. The only requirement per se, in order to receive Communion is that we realize our complete unworthiness.

Talking during Church

Please limit the amount of talking in the nave of the church. While there is a certain amount of church business and communication that must take place, it simply is not appropriate to greet people and have a conversation with them during the services. It is considered disrespectful. Talk to God while in church through your prayers, hymns, and thanksgiving, and to your friends downstairs afterwards at Coffee Hour. There is no peaceful time than before Divine Liturgy when our church is silent and prayers are being offered to our God.

Don't Shake the Bishop's or Priest's Hand

The proper way to greet a priest or bishop is to ask his blessing and kiss his right hand. 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, - saying "The blessing of the Lord be upon you" - and place his right hand over yours. This is much more traditional than shaking a cleric's hands. The priest and bishop are 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.

Sunday Dress

In days gone by worshippers to the Divine Services always wore their "Sunday best" to go to church. In fact, dress clothes were often referred to as church clothes. This, sadly, is not very 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. The same holds for our dress. Why wouldn't we want to offer Christ our best? He does, after all, give us his best. We should offer Christ our 'Sunday Best', not our everyday or common wear. It is most unfortunate in today's culture when we dress for work, social outings, school, and recreational activities better than we dress for church. Christ gives us his best, we need to give him our best, even in our dress. Here are some suggested guidelines we should try and adopt in our Holy Trinity parish. We often minimize the importance of our dress by offering that God does not care what we wear. The point however which needs to be emphasized, is that we should care. Why not give God our best!

Children

In many churches it is considered appropriate for only young children under 12 years of age to wear dress shorts to church. Athletic shorts, cut-offs, and spandex shorts are never appropriate church wear. Due to the fact our parish does not have air conditioning and it can become very uncomfortable at times, then if our young teens choose to wear dress shorts, especially on hot days, then that is acceptable. Shoes or sandals should be clean and tied. Sneakers are allowable at Holy Trinity, but please **no T-shirts**. Wearing a T-shirt, especially one with writing on it, is disrespectful. The youth and young adults of our parish are asked to wear a polo type of shirt — a collared shirt - most especially in the summer.

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. Be modest in dress. If women wear pants to church, they should be dress pants (not jeans, leggings, etc.). Shorts of any type for adults are not appropriate for church, no matter how hot it may be.

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). Blue jeans are usually too casual for church, especially ones with patches or holes. If someone is going somewhere after church and needs to dress casually, bring a change of clothing and change after coffee hour. Remember, use your best judgment and exhibit good taste when dressing for church. We are after all, going to meet and worship God.

Snacks for Children

Parents often bring snacks and a drink cup for children to quiet them during church services. For young children (0-5 years old), this is fine. But by the time children are 5-7 years old, they should be able to make it through an entire Divine Liturgy without eating or drinking anything. By the age of 8-9, children should begin to make the attempt to fast on Sunday morning for Communion by cutting back on the amount of breakfast and eating "fasting"-type foods. For those children who get snacks, please don't feed them while in the line for Holy Communion.

Worship for Children

Having a young child look through a soft covered prayer book during Divine Liturgy is much more appropriate, acceptable, and preferred than playing with toys, or coloring during worship. The goal should be to engage a young child in worship not simply to quiet them so they are not a distraction. If children choose to explore during Liturgy and want to kiss and touch icons, that is fine. Adults are asked not to discourage this type of learning simply because they might find this type of behavior to be distracting.

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 Holy Communion was prepared. While *antidoron* is not Holy Communion, it is blessed bread and as such, should be eaten carefully so that crumbs don't fall carelessly. If a person wants to give a piece of bread to someone else, take an extra piece - don't break yours in half as it is likely to crumble. Parents are asked to monitor the children as they take the *antidoron* and encourage them to eat it respectfully.

Leaving Before the Dismissal

Leaving church before the Dismissal Prayer deprives us of a blessing. Worship has a clear beginning ("*Blessed is the Kingdom...*") and a definitive end ("*Let us depart in peace...*"). We live in a fast-paced and ever-changing world. 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. It is the Lord's Day after all, and not ours. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God's holiness.

Final Thoughts

North American society in the early 21st century is rather casual in its approach to life. Please do not allow this prevailing attitude to enter into our Orthodox Christian piety. There are surely a lot of other areas that could be covered here in this outline. Much of church etiquette is based on common sense but is directed mostly by showing respect for God and others. Remember, we are in church to worship God, the Holy Trinity. The priest says, "With the fear of God and faith and love, draw near." Let this be the way everyone approaches all of worship. If so, each will no doubt have good and acceptable church etiquette. May God bless you.