

CHURCH ETIQUETTE

When does worship begin for Sunday service?



During the early part of the service the church you may see people walking up to the front of the church, praying in front of the iconostasis (the standing icons in front of the altar), kissing icons and lighting candles, even though the service is already going on. In an Orthodox church there is only one Eucharistic service (Divine Liturgy) per Sunday, and it is preceded by an hour service of Matins or Orthros (9:00am). One begins as soon as the previous ends. Matins (Orthros) is a preliminary service celebrating the good news of Resurrection of Christ which makes the liturgy possible which follows. Orthodox worshipers arrive at any point from the beginning of Matins through the early part of the Liturgy.

Why and when do we light candles?



The candles represent the sacrifice that we do for God; before Christ people slaughtered animals as a sacrifice. With the resurrection of Christ, the sacrifice is represented with the purchase of a candle for the health of each member of the family or friend. Also we light candles for the soul of a deceased Orthodox person.

With this purchase you give something of your own to God, and at the same time you help the House of God, which is explained in the New Testament by St. Paul the Disciple. When Christians go into the church, they buy and light several candles which also represent the light of Christ and the hope of everlasting life. When we light a candle, we pray for the person for whom we lit it for. So the candles have to be respected and to let them burn for respected times.

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 when the faithful are standing. A good rule of thumb to remember is – if everyone is stand wait.

Blot that Lipstick



Have you ever looked at an icon in just the right light and seen the lip prints all over it? It's disgusting, isn't it? In fact, it's downright gross. 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 During Church

Isn't it great to come to church and see friends and family? But wait until coffee hour to greet them. It just is not appropriate to greet or have conversation with them during the service. Besides being disrespectful towards God, it is rude towards the other people in the church who are trying to worship. Talk to God while in church through your prayers, hymns, and thanksgiving.

When do we venerate?



When we talk about “venerating” something we usually mean crossing ourselves and kissing it. Pay attention when you venerate it, 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. Show proper respect when venerating an icon.

When we first come into the church, we kiss the icons. Icons are painted pictures which depict an event from the life of Christ or the portrait of a person who reached sainthood. We do not worship icons; we only venerate them with faith, great respect and pray on them. They are also called “windows to heaven”. During the course of the history of the church some icons became miraculous because of the miracles they performed through the command of God.

You’ll also notice that some kiss the chalice, some kiss or touch the edge of the priest’s vestment as he passes by, the acolytes (altar boys) kiss his hand when they give him the censer, and we all line up to kiss the priest’s hand at the end of the service as we received the blessed bread.

The reason for kissing the hand of the priest has to do with our understanding that during the liturgy the hands of the priest are the hands that give out the body and blood of Christ (communion). It is also the laying on of hands that ordinations are done by the bishops. The laying on of hands goes back to the Apostles in the Orthodox Church.

Some of the faithful greet each other by shaking hands, while others kiss each other on each cheek. This greeting or “kiss of peace” is a liturgical act, a sign of mystical unity.

Do we stand when we pray?

In the Orthodox tradition, the faithful stand up for nearly the entire service. The reason for this is that we understand worship to be work. Sitting is a form of rest. We

believe that when in the presence of God we should all stand. If you find the amount of standing too challenging you're welcome to sit at any time.

When should you definitely stand? Always stand during the Gospel reading (everyone stands), the Little and Great Entrances, the Anaphor, and the distribution of Holy communion, whenever the priest gives a blessing, and the Dismissal. It is probably safer to follow what the people are doing in the first couple of rows. It is never wrong to stand in church. In the old Orthodox countries there are usually no pews.

Everyone will sit during the reading of the Epistle.

If the tradition of the parish you are visiting is to kneel, and everyone kneels, it is better to do so than stick out like a sore thumb. If there is a mixture of standing and kneeling, then stand.

When do we make the sign of the cross?



We sign ourselves whenever the Trinity is invoked, whenever we venerate the cross or an icon, and on many other occasions in the course of the Liturgy. People however, aren't expected to do everything the same way. Some cross themselves three times in a row (Holy Apostle mainly does this), and some finish by sweeping their right hand to the floor. On first entering a church people may come up to an icon, crossing themselves and bowing with right hand to the floor, then kiss the icon, then make one more bow.

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, at the time before and after Holy Communion, or when passing in from the Holy Altar; before venerating an icon, the cross, or Gospel book.

Not to Cross: When the priest or bishop blesses saying “Peace be to all” bow slightly and receive the 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.

Entering in Late

The time to arrive at church is before the service starts, but for some unknown reason, it has become the custom – or rather bad habit – for some to come to church late. If you arrive after the Divine Liturgy begins, try 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 giving the sermon, stay in the back until he has concluded. If in doubt, check with an usher. The best way to avoid this problem is to arrive on time. People who come late to the Liturgy should not partake of the Eucharist (communion).

Those who may partake in Holy Communion

Visitors should not be offended that they are not allowed to receive communion. It is important to know that communion is not given out as a means of hospitality. Anyone who is not Orthodox may receive Holy Communion if they wish to attend classes and convert to Orthodox Christianity. Orthodox believe that receiving communion is broader than me-and-Jesus; it acknowledges faith in historic Orthodox doctrine, obedience to a particular Orthodox bishop, and a commitment to a particular Orthodox worshipping community. There’s nothing exclusive about this; everyone is invited to make this commitment to the Orthodox Church. But the Eucharist is the Church’s treasure, and it is reserved for those who have united themselves with the Church, and have full knowledge of what Holy Communion is.

The Virgin Mary

A constant feature of Orthodox worship is veneration of the Virgin Mary, the “champion leader” of all Christians. We often address her as “Theotokos,” which means “Mother of God.” In providing the physical means for God to become man, therefore she had a pivotal role in our salvation.

We honor her, as Scripture foretold (“All generations will call me blessed,” Luke 1:48). When we sing “Through the intercession of the Theotokos, Savior, save us,” we don’t mean that she grants us eternal salvation, but that we seek her prayers for our protection and growth in faith. Just as we ask for each other’s prayers, we ask for the prayers of Mary and other saints as well. They’re not dead, after all, just departed to the other side. Icons surround us to remind us of all the saints who are joining us invisibly in worship. One reference to the saints surrounding us Hebrews 12:1 – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...”

What is the blessed bread?



Only Orthodox Christians may receive communion, but everyone may have some of the blessed bread offered at the conclusion of the liturgy. As we file past the priest, we come to an altar boy holding the basket of blessed bread. An Orthodox will accept the blessed antithoron, and kiss the priest's hand. Visitors and non-Orthodox friends may receive it at the end; it is not the Eucharistic Body. It is a sign of fellowship. Make sure you are careful not to let crumbs fall on the floor.

How do we greet the clergy?



The role of the priest is that of a spiritual father, preacher of the gospel, and the one who offers the sacraments. Part of his role is to continue the earthly ministry that St. Paul brought to the people. He is referred to in respect as father, because he is both a servant of the Lord, and also called to be the leader of the congregation. Just as St. Paul referred to himself as father of his flock in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15, the faithful refer to him in the same way as a way to honor the position of the priesthood. His wife also holds a special role as parish mother, and she gets a title too "Presbytera" (Greek), which means "priest's wife."

Did you know that 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, and place his right hand over yours. When you kiss their hands, you show respect for their office, so next time do not shake his hand, ask for his blessing.

Crossing Your Leg



In some Orthodox cultures, crossing one's legs is taboo and considered to be very disrespectful. In our Northern American culture, while there are no real taboos concerning it, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable while sitting. Should we cross our legs in church? No. Not because it is "wrong" to ever cross our legs, but rather because it is too casual and relaxed in church. Remember that sitting in church is a concession, not the normative way of prayer. You don't want your mind to wander off too much. When sitting in church, keep those feet on the floor, ready to stand at attention (which is what "Let us attend" means). Cross yourself with your fingers and hand, but don't cross your legs.

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"). To leave immediately after Communion is treat church like a fast food restaurant. In God's presence, we need to make every attempt to fight this pressure to move on to the next thing. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God's holiness. Thank God for his precious gifts.

