

# CHURCH ETIQUETTE

In the Orthodox Church there are numerous customs and traditions that are important parts of our worship. Some of these customs are universal to the Church, while some may vary from parish to parish, or cultural tradition. The following, adapted from an article by Fr. David Barr of the Antiochian Archdiocese, addresses questions most often asked by those new to the faith, and even those not so new...

## **Standing vs. Sitting**

The traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church is to stand. In “Orthodox countries”, there are usually no pews in the churches. Chairs or benches on the side walls are reserved for those who need them, i.e. the elderly, infirm, “with child”, etc. In North America, some Orthodox faithful have introduced pews into their churches thus creating the artificial “need” to figure out when to sit and when to stand. Whether a church has few chairs or many, there are times when one should stand:

- The beginning of the service: “Blessed is the Kingdom...”
- All Litanies - The Entrances: with the Gospel and later, the Chalice
- Gospel Reading
- The Creed, the Lord’s Prayer
- The Anaphora beginning with “Let us stand aright” through the Hymn to the Theotokos
- The distribution of Holy Communion, i.e. the Body and Blood of Christ in our midst, through the end of the dismissal

## **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 upon entering the Church, after venerating the icons. If a service is already in progress, and the candlestands are up front, it is a good idea to wait until after the service to light candles to not distract others from prayer, nor draw undue attention to oneself.

## **Entering Church (Late)**

Since this is entirely inappropriate, without due cause, for a Christian who has come to worship God, the point is mute. The same goes for leaving services early. Experience testifies that coming to Church late is more a matter of “habit” than circumstance: there are those who come late, and those who do not. One should refrain from venerating icons in the front of the Church, etc. for the same reasons given under “Lighting Candles”

### **Crossing Ones Legs**

In many cultures throughout the world, crossing one legs is taboo and considered very disrespectful. In North America there are no real taboos against such action, rather, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable. Should we do so in Church? No. Not because it is “wrong” for us ever to cross our legs, but because it is too casual - and too relaxed - for being in the presence of God. When we get settled in our favorite chair at home, we lean back, kick up our legs, and allow our minds to wander. Remember, sitting in Church is a concession, not the norm of prayer. We should remain attentive (i.e. “Let us attend”) at all times as a soldier prepared for spiritual battle before his commander. Should we sit, we must do so attentively and not too comfortably that our minds do not wander off the one thing necessary.

### **In and Out**

Certainly, parents should have ready access to the doors to take small children out to the washroom etc. - for this reason the doors are to be accessible. Furthermore, let us avoid congregating around the back, in the Narthex, to be tempted with useless discussion and let us challenge ourselves to move forward into the Nave and pray with the others.

### **A Word About Lipstick**

How can one say this lightly; lipstick looks terrible smeared on icons, crosses, the communion spoon, and the Priest’s or Bishop’s hand. Hand-made icons have been ruined by lipstick; and even though the cross or spoon can usually be cleaned after everyone venerates, it’s not very considerate to those who follow. What is the answer? If one insists on wearing lipstick to Church, blot your lips well before venerating... Point of consideration: God, Whom we alone come before in Liturgy, is not impressed with our external attractiveness, but with the adorning of our souls in humility, good works, and piety.

### **Kiss Don’t Shake the Bishop’s and Priest’s Hand**

The proper way to greet a Bishop or Priest is to ask his blessing and kiss his right hand. How do you do this? Approach the Bishop or Priest with your right hand over your left and say, “Father (Master in the case of a Bishop), bless.” This is appropriate and the traditional way of greeting, rather than shaking their hands. When you receive such a blessing, it is Christ Himself who offers the blessing through the hand of the priest or bishop.

### **Sunday Dress**

There was a time when people put on their “Sunday best” to go to church. By contrast, there is today a significant hostile response against such propriety. Many contemporary Churches innocently flaunt a “come as you are” pitch as part of their advertising ploy. Though God does not demand us to dress up for Him (as though He is in any way impressed by our external appearance), the fact is, as followers of Christ in all areas of our life, we should offer Christ our best and not just our leftovers (c.f. Cain and Abel). Our dress should always, especially at Church, be becoming of a Christian. We dress modestly, not in a flashy way that merely brings attention to ourselves.

### **Some Guidelines:**

Children: Only young children are allowed to wear shorts to church - but not athletic shorts, cut-offs, or spandex; (which are not appropriate for adults either). Tennis shoes that light up should probably be avoided, especially for altar servers, in that they draw attention away from prayer. T-shirts logos are a definite out.

Women: Dresses are certainly most appropriate, and are to be modest (i.e. tank tops, short skirts, and skin-tight dresses serve only one purpose contrary to the aim of being in Church). Slacks and pant-suites are an accepted part of our culture; nevertheless, tight jeans and spandex type wear are never appropriate.

Men: Men are also to dress modestly as befits a follower of Christ. While coat and tie are by no means mandatory, shirts with collars and clean pants / slacks are most appropriate. Again, shorts are to be avoided, particularly on Sunday morning.

The above guidelines may be adjusted for services outside of Divine Liturgy, i.e. Vespers. It is better to be in Church for prayer, than to not come at all for mere lack of a change of clothes - as may be the case when coming from a Saturday outing, or work etc. Finally, this is not a call for someone to buy an entire new wardrobe just to be a part of the Church! Use your best judgment and good taste when it comes to Church. You do not go to Church to be seen by people - you go to present yourself before, and to worship, God.

### **Making the Sign of the Cross**

A person looking around on a Sunday morning may notice that different people cross themselves at different times. To a certain extent, when to cross oneself is a matter of personal piety and not of dogma. However, there are times in the service when crossing oneself is called for: \*

To cross: when you hear one of the variations of the phrase; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; before venerating an icon, Gospel, or Cross; when blessed with an icon, Cross, Gospel, or Holy Gifts; entering and exiting the temple, when passing before the Altar \*

Not to Cross: (only bowing of the head): when blessed with hand (as in "Peace be unto All"), or censed. In receiving a blessing from a bishop or priest, one does not make the sign of the Cross beforehand. "In this way we ought to distinguish between reverence toward holy things and toward persons" (Jordanville Prayerbook)

### **Snacks for Children**

Parents often bring little snacks for young children to keep them occupied and quiet in church. This is fine if it is discreet and quiet, and the parent sees to cleaning up any leftovers. By the time a child is 3-4 years old this will most likely be unnecessary. In addition, by the time a child reaches age 7 they are mostly capable of fasting the entire morning of Holy Communion (or at least cutting back on breakfast). For those children who do require snacks during service, please refrain from feeding them, even a bottle, while in line for Communion, as they ought to come to the Holy Mysteries without food already in their mouths. Chewing gum is never

appropriate in Church.

### **Handling the Holy Bread**

After taking Communion, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, it is traditional to eat a piece of holy bread or antidoron - the left-over bread from which Holy Communion was prepared and various commemorations made. While antidoron is not the Body and Blood of Christ, it is blessed bread, and as such, we should take precaution to eat it carefully so that crumbs don't fall to be trampled underfoot. Monitor the children as they take the antidoron, teaching them to eat respectfully.

### **Final Thought**

Today's Canadian culture is rather casual, even faintly anarchist, in its approach to life. Dress, music, language, values, morals, and entertainment all reflect a trend to life from what God intended it to be. We must not allow this prevailing tendency to enter our Christian piety, whether at home or at Church. Most Church etiquette is based on simple common sense and a respect for God and others. We are in Church to worship our Triune God. The priest announces, "With the fear of God, love and faith, approach." If we approach our lives and our worship together with this in mind, then we will be people of proper Church etiquette.