

For Seekers:

What to Expect When You Visit St. Philip or Another Orthodox Church

This brochure is meant to answer many of the basic questions that are asked by first-time visitors to the Orthodox Church. Hopefully it will help you to understand some of the things you might see that are unfamiliar to you. If you have any questions that aren't answered by this brochure, please feel free to speak with Father Noah, Father James, or Deacon Herman after church services or call the church office at 215-721-4947. We are so happy to welcome you.

A Short History

The Orthodox Church traces Her origins to the time of Jesus Christ and His apostles. In fact, you could say that the Orthodox Church was born on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in the form of tongues of fire from Heaven. From that point, missionary activity carried Her teachings to many parts of the world, including Greece, Asia Minor, Russia, many parts of both Eastern and Western Europe, and the entire Middle East and North Africa. In addition, the Faith extended into India and eventually found its way to the shores of this continent as well.

However, a tragic separation occurred between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity around the year 1054, and the entire Western Church, under the leadership of the Pope of Rome, fell away from the rest of the Holy Orthodox Church. Since that separation, the two traditions have developed in quite different ways, and this is part of the reason for the unfamiliarity experienced by visitors to an Orthodox church.
ENOUGH HISTORY!!!

Worship For All The Senses

The first thing that you may notice when you visit us is that Orthodox worship engages all the five senses. For us worship is not a passive event. The burning candles and oil lamps, the

color, form and placement of the icons, the music of the choir, the fragrance of the incense, the taste of the Bread and Wine, all work to focus our entire being on the worship of the Living God.

Why Are There So Many Candles?

Since the Savior Himself taught that He is the Light of the World (John 8:12), our candles and lamps ultimately refer to His radiance. The Light of Christ illuminates all humanity—in fact it enlightens the whole world. Some of our light is provided by oil lamps. These recall the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids who kept their vigil for the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13), and help us to remember that we also must keep our watch for His coming again.

Some of our light is provided by wax candles. In Psalm 68 we read that the wicked (i.e. those who hate God) will disperse when they encounter Him in just the same way that wax melts near a fire. Our prayer is that any wickedness in us will vanish as the wax of a candle vanishes and is consumed by the flame. But more practically, wax candles are simply a convenient and age-old means of providing light by which to see.

The faithful light candles as a sign of their fervent prayer to God. We light candles and lamps before icons; we carry them in processions; we place them at various locations throughout the church building—simply to give off illumination. The more candles lit, the greater the illumination and greater is the image of the Empty Tomb of the Lord which shone forth with a brilliance far greater than the light of day.

May I Light A Candle Too?

Of course! While we ask our parishioners to purchase them, as our guests, you may take one and light it in the sand in one of the stands in the back of the church.

Why Do You Use Incense?

Psalm 141, declares “Let my prayer arise in Your sight as incense; the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

Incense is thus linked to prayer. In the Revelation (8:1-5) we also see this connection in a Christian context. In addition, we show that we honor someone or something when we burn incense before it or them. You will notice that the Gospel Book upon the Altar Table (the verbal image of Christ), the Altar Table itself (a sign of the Throne of God), the icons (themselves representing the presence of the holy men and women and the events in the history of salvation), and finally all the faithful people who have assembled for worship are censed. (Remember that human beings are made in the image and according to the likeness of God), (Genesis 1:27) thus we are icons too.

Why Are There So Many Icons Around?

We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:1-3) that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (literally, the martyrs) who watch after us and urge us on in our race toward Christ. We believe that the saints who have already run their race on earth indeed surround us—as in a stadium, the crowd surrounds the runners in the Olympics. In our homes, as well as in our churches, Orthodox Christians image this reality by the placement of icons. They are “Windows into Heaven” and are highly regarded by Orthodox believers.

Why Do People Kiss Icons When They Enter And Depart From The Church?

It is our belief that human beings have a deep God-given need to express what we feel inside when those feelings are pure and good. Orthodox Christians have great devotion and love for the individuals depicted in many of our icons. We have a great respect and veneration for the biblical and historical scenes depicted in our icons because those events are part of God’s plan of salvation for the life of the world. When an Orthodox Christian bows before and/or places a kiss upon an icon, the Gospel Book (or even another Christian) it is a sign of humility and devotion before God who acts through the individual (or Scriptures if that is the case) so that all His people may be brought back to Paradise. Many people do not understand this idea at first but little by little come to realize that it is the deepest kind of veneration, whereby the worshiper can actually experience heaven for a moment...

Isn't All That Idolatry?

Are you worshipping your mother, father, husband, wife, son or daughter when you give that person a kiss? Of course not. It is our belief that the outward honor we pay to the material reality extends to the “prototype.” There is also a vast distinction between honor (i.e. veneration or respect), and worship. We worship God alone, and may have no others before Him (Exodus 20:3). The Orthodox Church has already dealt with the issue of those who could not make that distinction (i.e. the “iconoclasts”) in the 8th century, 7th Ecumenical Council.

Why Is The Whole Service Sung *A Capella*?

It is held that the human voice is at its best in song. The voice is the musical instrument created by God Himself. For Orthodox Christians then, the voice is the one instrument which is most fitting for the praise of God. Therefore all services are sung to reflect the heavenly music of the angels. The divine words of the services are much too precious to simply speak in normal, spoken form. Rather, they are couched in golden melodies fit for the worship of Almighty God. With the exception of the sermon, which is spoken, all parts of the services are sung.

Why Do People Stand For The Whole Service?

The Lord once declared that “Whenever two or more are gathered in My Name, I am in their midst.” (Matthew 18:20) Orthodox Christians could not conceive of simply sitting in the presence of the Lord especially while in worship. It is a sign of respect when the elderly, a judge or even the President of the United States enters a room that those assembled rise up. No less do we stand (or kneel in humility) before the King of Glory who comes invisibly upborne by unseen armies of angels. In the Orthodox tradition standing is the most appropriate attitude for prayer and worship because, for us worship is not a “spectator sport.” Those who are not able to stand for whatever reason are not, of course, expected to do so. You may use the chairs provided.

Must I Stand All The While?

You should do what you feel comfortable doing. Many people get weary after a while and they sit down. Others feel more comfortable remaining on their feet so as not to appear conspicuous. Don't worry. We only ask that you stand with us at least during the reading of the Gospel, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and at the time of Holy Communion.

Liturgical Customs

If you are coming from a western background, all of this action may seem very strange and make you feel uncomfortable at first. Many of the people at St. Philips are converts and have also experienced these same feelings. Before very long though, you will very naturally begin to participate.

Why Do You Make The Sign Of The Cross?

One of the things that you will see us do throughout the course of a service is to make the Sign of the Cross. The Sign of the Cross is an important expression of our faith. In fact, it has been said that as long as Orthodox Christians are taught to properly make the Sign of the Cross, the Orthodox Faith will remain safe, since this symbol encapsulates so much of our core theology. In the Orthodox Churches, the Sign of the Cross is made with the right hand. The thumb is joined with the first two fingers at the tip, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The remaining two fingers are closed at the palm symbolizing the dual nature of Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Who entered time as the God-Man Jesus Christ.

The Sign of the Cross begins with the right hand touching the forehead, the abdomen, the right shoulder, and finally the left shoulder. The Sign of the Cross is typically made at the mention of the Holy Trinity, when the priest blesses the congregation, at the beginning and end of the reading of the Holy Gospel, and as a response to the petitions in the litanies.

Why Do People Bow?

A bow of reverence is frequently made when entering and leaving the church, passing in front of the altar, and in front of the holy icons. At times during the course of the service, the priest will even bow to the congregation and they will bow back. This bow is a sign of respect and submission to God (and to God's people), and sometimes a symbol of repentance and forgiveness.

Why Is The Priest Separated From The Congregation?

The area where the priest celebrates the majority of the services lies beyond the icon screen (or Iconostasis) and is the SANCTUARY. This is where the Altar Table is situated, as well as the Table of Oblation, where the Holy Gifts are prepared before the Liturgy begins. (Leavened bread and red grape wine are the elements used for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. During the Divine Liturgy, these elements are mysteriously changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit). The Sanctuary is the Holy of Holies and the Altar is the Throne of God. Only those having a function in the Sanctuary are permitted within. The curtain hanging on the Royal Doors in the center of the icon screen is the New Testament version of the curtain shielding the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem. Through the Royal Doors passes Jesus Christ in the form of His Word, the Holy Gospel and the Holy Gifts (THE FIRST ENTRANCE DURING THE DIVINE LITURGY IS CALLED THE LITTLE ENTRANCE AND THE SECOND ENTRANCE IS CALLED THE GREAT ENTRANCE). There are also two other doors on the icon screen called Deacon's Doors, through which everyone passes except the priest or bishop during special times of the service, when he may pass through the Royal Doors.

The Nave

This is the body of the church and is where the faithful worship. In traditional Orthodox Churches there are no pews and the feeling is one of true oneness and participation. Pews were brought in from contact with the Western Churches, especially here in America.

The Narthex

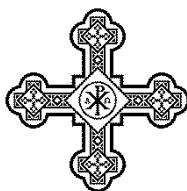
This part of the church historically has had a very important function. It held those who were either learning about the Church in preparation for Baptism (catechumens) or those under penance who could not enter into the nave for some particular sin. In monasteries, these vestibules were enormous (and some still are) and the monks ate their meals there. There are usually a set of doors separating the vestibule from the nave and these can be closed during the part of the service after the priest or deacon proclaims “THE DOORS, THE DOORS...”

There are many other parts of the temple which you might be thinking about, so please ask about them! Needless to say, the Orthodox pray with all of their senses in order to fully immerse themselves in the total worship of God.

A Word About Belief

We are the Church of the New Testament, founded by Christ who said that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. We believe in the Holy Trinity, One God manifested in Three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe in the Divinity of Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, Who became a man for our salvation. Our services are primarily taken from the Holy Scriptures, but some of the hymns came into being during later centuries. We hold that sacred Tradition is just as vital as the Bible for the life of the Church, and that the Bible, in fact, cannot be properly understood or interpreted outside of that very Tradition. There is still much to say about the Mother of God, fasting, saints, the Feast days of the Church, customs, etc., but if you like what you see and hear so far, there will be plenty of time to answer the lifetime of questions which only the Orthodox Church can answer in Her unique and mystical way. May God bless you in your search for the Truth and we thank you and welcome you to worship with us again.

In Christ, + *Fr. Noah*



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