

Reverence in God's House

Entering the Church (Late)

The time to arrive at church is before the service starts. 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. Try not to interrupt the Liturgy with your entrance; 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!

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 in the face. You wouldn't go up and kiss the Lord or His mother on the lips, would you? You would kiss their hand, and only if they invited you would you even dare to kiss them on the cheek. Pay attention to what you are doing. When you approach an icon to 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. As you venerate an icon, show proper respect to the person depicted in the icon - the same respect you would show the person by venerating him or her in an appropriate place. And remember, blot off your lipstick before kissing.

Blot that Lipstick!

Have you ever looked at an icon in just the right light and seen the lip prints all over it? Yuck! Lipstick may look fine on lips, but it looks horrible on icons, crosses, the Gospel book, 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. The same applies to any lip balm. What is the answer? If you are wearing lipstick or lip balm, 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.

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 Little or Great Entrances, or the sermon. Candles remind us that Christ is the Light of the world. They are also a financial offering to the Church and a "burnt offering" to God.

Row Blocking

Never heard of row blocking? It's that practice of sitting right next to the aisle so that no one else can get by to sit in the middle of the row. Everyone has seen it. In fact, the best row blockers come early so they can get their coveted aisle seats and then be sure that no one can get past them. The most effective form of row blocking takes place when two people take their places at opposite ends of the pew, occupying both the center and outer aisle seats. This effectively eliminates anyone else from sitting on that row. Please move toward the middle of the row, leaving the aisle seats for those coming later. For those with small children who may need to make a fast exit, or if you just can't handle sitting in the middle of the row, be sure to graciously allow those coming after you to go past by getting up and moving out for them so they can get by. (At St. Philip's, this is especially important on the choir side; please allow choir members access to empty seats for the sermon.) Remember, row blocking isn't hospitable - nor is it an efficient method of seating. So don't be selfish. Move on over toward the middle. Don't be a row blocker.

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, or when passing in front of the Holy Altar; before venerating an icon, the cross, or Gospel book.

Not to Cross: At the chalice before or after taking Communion (you might hit the chalice with your hand); when being censured, or when the priest or bishop blesses saying, "Peace be to all" (bow slightly and receive the blessing); when receiving a 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).

Standing vs. Sitting

The traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church has been to stand. In the Orthodox "old countries", there are usually no pews in the churches. Chairs or benches on the side walls are usually reserved for the elderly and infirm. In North America, we have tended to build our churches with pews, and since we have them, we need to figure out when we may sit and when we should stand.

First of all, it is fully acceptable (even preferable) to stand for the entire service. 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.

When should you definitely stand? Always during the Gospel reading, the Little and Great Entrances, the Anaphora, the distribution of Holy Communion, whenever the priest gives a blessing, and the Dismissal. In many parishes, the Divine Liturgy books in the pew have suggested times when sitting is acceptable.

Follow those instructions (it's probably safer than to follow what the people are doing in the first couple of rows). When in doubt, stand. It is never wrong to stand in church.

Talking during Church

Isn't it great to come to church and see friends and family members? But wait until coffee hour to say "hi." It just isn't appropriate to greet people and have a conversation with them during the services. Besides being disrespectful toward God, it is rude toward the other people in the church who are trying to worship.

What about in the Narthex, is it OK to talk there? No. The narthex is part of the church and should also have a prayerful atmosphere. Unfortunately, parents with young children who bring them to the narthex to quiet down are sometimes surrounded by chatter from adults who should know better.

Talk to God while in church through your prayers, hymns, and thanksgiving, and to your friends in the Great Room afterwards.

But... what do you do if someone starts to talk to you during church? Quietly and joyfully say, "Let's talk during coffee hour."

Crossing those Legs?

In some Orthodox cultures, crossing one's legs is taboo 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. Should we cross our legs in church? No. Not because it is "wrong" to ever cross legs, but rather because it is too casual - and too relaxed - for being in church. Just think about it, 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 off too much. In fact, when you do sit in church, you should sit attentively - and not too comfortably. 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!

In and Out

This shouldn't be the traffic pattern by the back door during services. 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 to 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 and worship.

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 down (not to play), **then return to Liturgy**. (Follow the rules for entering late: not during readings, sermons, or Entrances.)

Snacks for Children

You can always tell where young children have been sitting in the church. The tell-tale signs are graham cracker crumbs, Cheerios, and animal crackers. Parents often bring snacks and a cup of fruit juice along for children during church. And for young children (0-2 years old), this is fine. But by the time children are 3-4 years old, they should be able to make it through Liturgy without eating anything, and by the time they reach the age of their first confession, they should begin fasting on Sunday morning for Communion (talk to your priest about this). For those children who get snacks, please don't feed them while in the line for Holy Communion (this applies to holy bread as well). They need to come to Communion without food in their mouths. And one last note: try to keep the snack mess down to a minimum. Also, chewing gum during Liturgy is a No-No for everyone!

Touching the Hem of Father's Garments

Many people like to touch the hem of Father's *phelonion* as he goes through the congregation for the Great Entrance. This is a nice, pious custom by which you "attach" your personal prayers to the prayer of the entrance with the holy gifts. It also reminds us of the miraculous healing of a woman who touched Christ's garment (Luke 8). At the same time, you need to be careful neither to grab too hard and trip up the Great Entrance, nor to push people out of the way. And be sure to help your children so that they observe these guidelines as well.

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 all over the place. After taking Communion or kissing the cross at the end of the Divine Liturgy, take one piece of *antidoron* (you don't need four or five pieces) 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 monitor your children as they take the *antidoron* and teach them to eat it respectfully.

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 ("Through the prayers of our holy Fathers ... Amen"). To leave immediately after Communion is to treat church like a fast food restaurant where we come and go as we please. 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. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God's holiness. Eat and run at the fast-food place - but stay in church and thank God for his precious gifts.

Greeting a Priest or Bishop

Did you know that the proper way to greet a priest or bishop is to ask 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. When you kiss their hands, you show respect for their office - they are icons of Christ our High Priest and offer the holy gifts on your behalf. So 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 our "Sunday best", not our everyday or common wear. 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.

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.

Final Thoughts

There are surely many other areas that could be covered when discussing Reverence in God's House. North American society in our time is rather casual in its approach to life; don't allow this prevailing attitude to enter into your Orthodox Christian piety. Remember, we are all growing in godliness, and many have physical needs that force them to "break" some of the rules of etiquette; therefore we must bear with one another. Much of church etiquette is based on 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 of God and faith and love, draw near." Let this be the way you approach all of worship. If you do, you will probably have good church etiquette.

Above adapted from <http://www.theologic.com/oflweb/inchurch/etiquet.htm>

Children and Worship

Children need help to grow in reverence and understanding of our multi-sensory worship; yet they remind us to approach God with wonder, spontaneity, and joy. Here are some practical tips to keeping this balance.

Be edified by a child's eagerness to venerate an icon, but if he is not tall enough to kiss it on its stand, please help by lifting the child up or bringing the icon down. Also, we can whisper to the children the meaning of particular icons; if we listen, we may receive a fresh insight. Quietly and appropriately, we can take them around to "meet the saints" on the walls.

Bring children closer to a procession or a censing, to better appreciate the holy movement, but don't let their exuberance cause an accident or traffic jam.

If you have half a voice, sing along with the hymns that you know, this will lead your children into greater love of God. Sing with them at home too.

If a parent is struggling with a young child, ask God to give them peace and reward them for their efforts and embarrassment; then joyfully and lovingly ask how you can help.

We are all in this together, growing from grace to grace and building up the body of Christ to God's glory! *-Fr Noah*