ORTHODOX HOW TO

Church Etiquette or Some Things You Should Know while in Church

4/7/2018  READING TIME: 15 MINUTES
In the Orthodox Church, there are a lot of customs and traditions that are important parts of our worship. Some are cultural; some are pious customs. Some are essential; some are not. From time-to-time, we need to address some of these various etiquette issues to inform our communities how we can best understand each other and work together to worship the all-holy Trinity.
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.

Lighting Candles
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 probably all right to light a candle.

![Image](image-url)

**Entering the Church (Late)**

The time to arrive at church is before the service starts, but for some unknown reason, it has become the custom - or rather the 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 one of the ushers to see if it is a good time to seat yourself. Try not to interrupt the Liturgy with you entrance. By the way,
Eucharist!

**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? It's a hamburger place in LA, but 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.

**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 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 McDonald's - but stay in church and thank God for his precious gifts.

**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.
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) and 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 and 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.

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" to them. It just isn't appropriate to greet people and have a conversation with them during the services. Besides being disrespectful towards God, it is rude towards
Kiss (Don't Shake) the Priest's or Bishop's Hand

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." This is much more appropriate (and traditional) than shaking their hands. After all, 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. 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
modestly, not in a flashy way that would bring attention to ourselves. Our dress should always be becoming of a Christian - especially at church.

Here are some specific guidelines we use in our parishes:

**Children**

Only young children (under 10) should wear shorts to church - and then only dress shorts. Athletic shorts, cut-offs, and spandex shorts are never appropriate church wear (for children or adults!). Shoes or sandals should be clean and tied. No one should wear T-shirts with any kind of writing on them ("This Bud's for You!" is definitely out).

**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
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). Slacks should be cleaned and pressed. Jeans (of any color) are usually too casual for church, especially ones with patches or holes. Again, shorts are not appropriate church wear.

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.

Pew Blocking

Never heard of pew 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 pew. Everyone has seen it. In fact, the best
people take their places at opposite ends of the pew, occupying both the center and aisle seats. This effectively eliminates anyone else from sitting on that row. There are two solutions to pew blocking. The first is to move towards the middle of the pew, leaving the aisle seats for those coming later. And for those of you who just can’t handle sitting in the middle of the pew [or those with small children who may need to make a fast exit - NTK], take the outside aisle spot and graciously allow those coming after you to go past (by moving out for them so they can get by). Remember, pew blocking isn’t hospitable - nor is it an efficient method of seating. So don’t be selfish. Move on over towards the middle. Don’t be a pew 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:
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 in 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 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).

**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. 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.

**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 seven (the age of their first confession), they should begin fasting on Sunday morning for Communion (or at least make an attempt at fasting by cutting back on the amount of breakfast and eating "fasting"-type foods - 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:
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.

A Final Thought
surely a lot of other areas that could be covered here. 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.

By Fr. David Barr

Source: http://antiochian.org/christianeducation/etiquette
18 COMMENTS:

ANONYMOUS  APRIL 27, 2018 AT 4:28 PM
Just one comment. I do not believe in wearing pants of any kind for ladies.

Reply

Replies

ANONYMOUS  MAY 4, 2018 AT 6:52 AM
True dat

SABRINA MESSENGER  MAY 4, 2018 AT 8:15 AM
Will you two anonymous cowards please get into the 21st Century? Women have worn pants in the USA for at least 70 years. You can still be a lady and wear pants! Most emotionally mature people realize that.

Reply
Very informative. One thing I would say is also lasies, watch the length of your dress. They should be long enough to cover everything when bending over to kiss icons. And tuck shirts in no one wants to see crack when someone is prostrating. Thank you!

Reply

ANONYMOUS  MAY 1, 2018 AT 5:08 AM

Regarding both arriving to the church ON TIME, sometime during Orthros, and taking a seat closest to the center or side aisles: many older folks have medical reasons for that: overactive urinary bladder syndrome, stress urinary incontinence, etc., and when nature FREQUENTLY calls, IT YELLS. I have recurrent bladder cancer which forces my bladder, as an invasive irritant, to quickly empty my male bladder, often every 30-45 minutes diurnally and 5-7 times between 10PM and 6AM. Casual waiting WILL NOT WORK. When my parasympathetic nerves receive the message to empty my bladder, I have 30-45 seconds to get to the men's room, or the result is unstoppable urinary incontinence. Sitting in the MIDDLE of a church pew, esp. those w/ kneelers, are a real impediment and impending incontinent event "climbing" over other parishioners to make it to the men's room, usually in the Narthex. Sorry folks, if you feel you "own a pew spot" on the ends of the pews only to have your "best view of the priest or the iconostasis or a certain Holy Icon," ya' have NO idea what it is like to have a medical need for some to sit at the ends of pews dealing with recurrent, largely incurable urinary bladder cancer. Yours protestations to Father or the Parish council are hollow, mean-spirited, selfish, and sinful. For God's sake, ASK the "offending" person if they claim the end pew seat for medical reasons. Remember, we are NOT the Methodist churches which used to force people to purchase their favorite church seat, prior to the arrival of the 'Free Methodist Churches,' where that selfish practice ceased in the early 1900's for reasons similar to what I have described above.

Reply

ANONYMOUS  MAY 1, 2018 AT 6:59 PM

Also, very inappropriate to chew gum in church.

Reply
Headcoverings for all women in church is a REQUIREMENT not an OPTION!

Reply

ANONYMOUS  MAY 4, 2018 AT 6:54 AM
You are dressing for the most important man that you will ever know.

Reply

ANONYMOUS  MAY 4, 2018 AT 6:55 AM
Dress in your best, but respectfully.

Reply

SABRINA MESSENGER  MAY 4, 2018 AT 8:18 AM
Some of you are focusing way too much on judging the women as if men can do no wrong! Maybe if the men kept their minds on the Lord and NOT on what a woman is or is not wearing, they'd be better off. This is one of the reasons why so many people will not go to church, and they see all Christians as judgmental hypocrites. Please stop it if you want this church to grow and folks to come to salvation.

Reply

Replies

ANONYMOUS  MAY 7, 2018 AT 10:41 PM
1) It is not about bad men who think only about women and their clothes. It is about the tradition and our obedience. That's it.
2) We all are hypocrites, because we are corrupted by sin. People who are looking for God, will find Him in the Church. At the same time, those who are looking for sin will find sin. Hypocrisy, envy, spite and so on. We come there to meet God, not to meet people and not to satisfy
There are different people in the Church. No matter how bad they can be, the Church will grow anyway.

ROSE CAMPBELL  MAY 6, 2018 AT 12:40 PM

Head covering is not required in the Greek Orthodox church I attend. I am a member of a church in the Chicago metropolis. If a woman wants to wear one, she is welcome to do so, but she is not looked down upon if she does not cover her head.

ANONYMOUS  MAY 7, 2018 AT 10:49 PM

From my own experience, I can say that there’s no such problem in Russian Orthodox Church as head covering. People know that it’s a tradition, they know its origin and they are pleased to follow this canon.

Of course, if a woman enters the church and doesn’t cover her head, no one has the right to judge her, and spiritually sensible people understand that it’s not the reason for conviction. Unfortunately, still there are way to many people who do not understand this. People can go to church for 10-15-20 years and still don’t understand these simple things.

ANONYMOUS  MAY 25, 2018 AT 11:33 AM

God is not petty, people are. If you are going to church and judging others how godly are you. Lets remember at the time church was established people dressed different including head cover. However, I
SOFIE BULR  JUNE 9, 2018 AT 4:40 PM
Show me a woman saint that's pictured with pants and I will agree with you. We are talking about etiquette here not 21st century dress in America. Whilst we also disagree however please don't feel as though you are obliged to wear a skirt or dress in church. Feel free to wear trousers if that is your choice.

ANONYMOUS  OCTOBER 16, 2018 AT 3:54 PM
Excellent post. I want to thank you for this informative read; I really appreciate sharing this great post. Keep up your work.

THOMAS VOIGT  OCTOBER 21, 2018 AT 2:42 PM

ANONYMOUS  OCTOBER 22, 2018 AT 12:33 PM
Some is common sense. Other parts are militants and dogmatic. I appreciate a priest is performing a ritual and service; as are parents who tend to their children. Not every child can or will make it through a liturgy, especially with a medical issue. I will not be attending services in your parish.