

A Guide to Church Etiquette



**How to Show Proper Respect
and Reverence in Church**

CHURCH ETIQUETTE

The Holy Orthodox Church is perhaps one of the last social institutions where dignity, protocol, respect, and reverence are maintained. This is primarily because when we come to the church and its services we are entering the Kingdom of God on earth, His habitation, and we choose to honor this sacred place by our attentiveness to what is proper and ordered. We have the opportunity to reflect the image of Christ within us by our actions. “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9).

This guide is meant for personal reflection, not as a means of judging others. Keep in mind that there are different traditions even among the Orthodox faithful. We come to church to pray and worship God above all else, and that should be our only focus.

Entering the Church

The Orthodox Divine Liturgy begins when the priest intones, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” We need to arrive early enough to receive this blessing. Arriving later causes a distraction for others who are praying. If an occasional problem occurs and you have to come in late, enter the church reverently and quietly. The times in which you must stay in the back of the church, or the narthex, before entering include: when the Little or Great Entrance is taking place, when the priest is censuring the icons

and congregation or giving the homily, and when the Epistle or Gospel is being read. If you are unsure when is the best time to enter the church, ask one of the ushers for guidance.

We come to the church on time, as if to a great banquet, and with reverence, because we are partaking of the very Body and Blood of Christ, our Savior. Coming to Orthros or Matins before the Divine Liturgy will ensure that you will be settled in plenty of time to pray without distraction.

Standing in Church

It is the custom of some Orthodox Christians to stand throughout the Divine Liturgy, as well as during other services. If you choose to stand in a church that has pews, please do so near the back or sides so that the view of the altar is not blocked for those who are seated. If you are accustomed to sitting during the Divine Liturgy, remember to stand at these times: when the Liturgy begins and the priest gives the blessing; during the Little and Great Entrances; when the priest is censuring the icons and congregation; during the Gospel reading; at the Anaphora; for Holy Communion; and at the final Blessing. Whenever a hierarch is visiting the parish, out of respect follow his example and stand and sit when he does.

Lighting of Candles

It is a pious Orthodox tradition to light candles for personal petitions and intercessions when entering the church. Most parishes have designated candle stands or holders for these candles.

It is not proper to light candles at certain times during the service—generally the same times when you should not enter the church, such as during the Little and Great Entrances, when the priest is censuring the icons and congregation or giving the homily, or during the reading of the Epistle or Gospel.

The candles should be allowed to burn all the way down without being extinguished early, since the burning candle symbolizes our prayers rising to heaven and the light of Christ in our midst. Please do not allow young children to light candles

alone, for safety reasons. It is customary to make a donation for each candle.

Venerating Icons

The Orthodox Church teaches that it is proper to venerate, not worship, icons. The acceptable way to do this is to kiss either the hands or feet of the saint depicted in the icon, or the scroll, the Gospel book, or the hand cross a saint is holding. Please **do not** wear lipstick when kissing the icons since the residue will ruin them.

Additional Pious Customs

- **Crossing oneself**—It is always appropriate to cross oneself at the mention of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; whenever entering or leaving the church; at the beginning of the Liturgy; when passing in front of the altar; when venerating an icon, the Gospel, or the cross; and at times for personal petitions.

It is not necessary to cross oneself when the priest is giving a blessing or censuring the congregation. Instead, one should bow to receive the blessing.

- **Bowing**—Orthodox Christians bow when the Theotokos and Christ are petitioned. They also bow to the priest at his blessing, and when he asks forgiveness before the Great Entrance and again before Holy Communion. It is traditional for the Orthodox faithful to bow and cross themselves when they enter and leave the church, and when they pray before the icons.

- **Kneeling**—In some Orthodox traditions there are times when kneeling is a pious practice in the Liturgy, the most notable being at the Consecration of the Holy Gifts. However, kneeling is prohibited during the Paschal season, from Pascha to Pentecost, in honor of the Resurrection.

- **Touching the priest's vestments**—It is a tradition in some parishes to touch the hem of the priest's vestment or phelonion

as he passes by in the Great Entrance with the Holy Gifts. This custom imitates the woman who was healed by touching the hem of Christ's robe. When touching the hem of the priest's phelonion, one should be careful not to step in front of the procession, to pull or tug on the garment, or to push anyone away.

Special Considerations During Liturgy

- **Refrain from socializing during the Liturgy.** Save your greetings and conversations for the fellowship hall. We are in the Liturgy to greet God with our prayers and worship, not to distract others.
- **Cell phones and texting are never allowed in the church.** If you have a professional reason to carry a phone for emergencies, **keep it on mute**, not vibrate, and sit near the exit so that leaving for an emergency will not be a distraction to others. **Otherwise, turn off your phone before entering the sanctuary.**
- **Refrain from reserving seats.** Allow others to sit as they come into the church, and especially make room for visitors so they will feel welcome.
- **Lipstick—Do not** wear lipstick while taking Holy Communion, or when kissing the cross, an icon, the priest's or bishop's hand, or any sacred object. It is best not to wear it at all in the church, because of the damage it causes.
- **Leg crossing—**One should not be too casual in the Divine Liturgy. People from some cultures are offended by the crossing of legs or by arms thrown back over the pew. Keeping your feet on the ground also enables you to remain attentive and to stand when necessary.

Receiving the Antidoron, Holy Bread

When receiving the antidoron after Holy Communion or after venerating the cross at the end of Divine Liturgy, do not

allow the crumbs to drop, since this is blessed bread. Children will need assistance so that they do not take too many pieces, and so they are not careless in handling the bread. After returning to your seat, you may eat the holy bread as you say the prayers after Holy Communion silently while others are communing.

Children in Church

Christ said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). It is possible for young children to remain in church throughout a service if they are taught to be quiet and respectful. Many parishes have cry rooms or nurseries for those who are too small to be quiet throughout the whole Liturgy. Please be respectful to those around you if your child becomes fussy or out of control, and remove him from the nave of the church quickly. If a very young child needs a snack, please clear away any leftover pieces. However, the child should not have anything in his mouth when he comes to Holy Communion. It is not acceptable at any time to chew gum in church.

It is never appropriate to allow a child to run down the aisles, play loudly, or carry toys that make noise. Eventually, children will be able to spend longer times in the Liturgy. That is where they should be, but remember the reason for coming to church is to pray and worship. Plan to have your children use the restroom and get a drink before church begins, and don’t allow them to come and go continually.

Consider bringing your children into the church at a time when the Liturgy is finished to “practice” church behavior. Teach them that they are visiting God’s very special house, and they will need to have very special manners there.

Leaving Church

The respectful protocol is to leave the church only after the final blessing, and after kissing or venerating the cross held by the priest at the end of the Divine Liturgy. It is not acceptable

to be in the church hall, kitchen, or an administrative office during Liturgy. Some parishes have church school at the end of the Liturgy. This is the only exception allowed. Those who leave early deprive themselves of a blessing. After walking to the back of the nave of the church, it is customary to face the altar, bow, and make the sign of the cross.

Greeting the Priest and Bishop

In our modern culture, we greet one another with a handshake. The exception to this is when we greet a member of the clergy. We do not shake a bishop's or priest's hand; we kiss it with reverence and ask for a blessing. The proper way to do this is to approach the hierarch or priest with right hand over left, palms facing up, and then bow while saying, "Master, bless" to the hierarch, or "Father, bless" to the priest. If either places his hand in yours while blessing you, this is an appropriate time to kiss his hand. We kiss his hand because we are honoring Christ, whom he represents.

Church Clothing

Whenever we are preparing to come to church, we should remember that we will be entering the House of God. This requires that we dress modestly and with reverence. Generally this will mean that we want to wear our best clothing. **At any age** it is not appropriate to wear shorts, pants that are too casual, short skirts, tight-fitting or transparent garments, garments with low necklines, or strapless tops. Some Orthodox traditions require women to wear dresses or skirts with covered shoulders and backs. Although men are not required to wear a suit and tie, they will want to make an effort to dress as if they were going to an important event. Clothing with logos or printed material distracts others from praying. Some women have the pious tradition of covering their heads. Men and boys must remove their hats when entering the church.

What could be a more important meeting than that with God Himself? The purpose in choosing our clothing wisely is that we model what is important to us by how we dress.

Photography in the Church

Whenever photography will take place during a service at an Orthodox church (including special events such as weddings and baptisms), please make sure to instruct photographers that pictures and videos may not be taken from behind the priest or standing in front of the altar.

Church Banquets

Often, in order to serve a large group of people at the same time, caterers will preset the banquet tables with the first course. *Before beginning to eat* it's important to remember to wait for everyone to be seated and for the blessing of the food. If there is a program, please remember to listen politely instead of having side conversations that will distract others from hearing. Remember the context in which this banquet is being held; since it is a parish event, **dress respectfully and modestly.**

Above all:

“In all things give glory to God.”

Text for this booklet was prepared by
The Department of Marriage and Parish Family Ministry
of the Antiochian Orthodox
Christian Archdiocese of North America
in conjunction with Conciliar Media Ministries.

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