

Church Etiquette

by Fr. Dimitri Tsakas

Many times people ask me about what is "the done thing" at Church. So I decided to dedicate some space here to answering common questions like what are the different parts of the Church, when do I do my Cross, when should we be standing during services and similar questions. I hope you find the information here useful remembering of course that it acts as a guide and not simply as a list of "dos and don'ts".

Parts of the Church Building

The Church Building is divided into three parts called the Narthex, Nave and Sanctuary:

1. The Narthex is the first part where we enter, light a candle, venerate the icons and generally prepare ourselves for entrance into the Nave for worship. Here when we enter we do the sign of the Cross, light a Candle (which symbolises our acceptance of Christ as the light of the World), and kiss the icons (first the Icon of Christ and then the others). It is in the Narthex that we slow down our thoughts and begin our prayer. The Narthex is a place of preparation for our entrance into another reality, namely the Heavenly worship of the Church. If we arrive during the reading of the Bible or during any processions, we should stand still until they are finished before lighting a candle or doing anything else in the Narthex.
2. The Nave is the main middle part of the Church where the congregation gathers for worship. It represents Heaven on earth.
3. The Sanctuary, separated from the Nave by the Iconostasis, is always located toward the East because Christ, the Light of the world is symbolised by the rising sun. In the sanctuary are the Altar Table, the Proskomide (where the Gifts for Holy Communion are prepared), and the Large Crucifix reminding us of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross for our salvation. Strictly speaking, only the clergy are allowed in this area and those to whom they give a blessing to be there also.

Services

The Church holds many services. Matins is a morning prayer service usually held before the Divine Liturgy on Sunday and other Feast Days. Vespers is an evening prayer service usually held on the eve of a feast. The most frequently attended service is the Divine Liturgy held every Sunday and major feast day throughout the year. Here at St. George we also hold the Divine Liturgy in English every Saturday Night. The Divine Liturgy is sometimes also referred to as the Divine Eucharist. The Liturgy is the Service in which we have Holy Communion. During each service the Priest stands at the Altar. He is human, a member of God's people, but vested with the authority to offer the

Eucharist and lead the worship. It is the proper custom to be at Church for the beginning of the Liturgy or at least before the Epistle and Gospel Readings.

The Sign of the Cross

The Cross is the most powerful Symbol in Christianity, because Christ died on it. The proper Orthodox Cross is made by holding the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand together and resting the remaining two fingers on the palm. The three fingers together represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the remaining two on the palm represent the two natures of Christ as God and man. This is a summary of the Christian Faith. The fingers and thumb are placed first on the forehead, then the stomach, the right shoulder, then the left shoulder. (The right shoulder is touched first because the Bible teaches that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father). The motion of making the Cross should be continuous and distinct, and certainly not rushed. Sometimes a person will make the sign of the Cross and then bow and touch the floor. This is common in traditional Orthodox worship and is known as a Metania or Prostration. Touching the ground is a reminder of where we come from and where we will return, namely the earth.

When to Make the Sign of the Cross:

1. Whenever you feel the need
2. Before and after any prayers
3. When you enter and leave the Narthex and Nave
4. Before you kiss an Icon, Cross, or the Gospel Book
5. When you pass the Altar
6. When you hear any of the following phrases;
 - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
 - Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Have Mercy on Us
 - The words Christ, Theotokos, Panayia or Virgin Mary
 - The Name of a Saint
7. After the reading of the Epistle or Gospel
8. Near the end of the Creed at the phrase In One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church
9. Before and after the Consecration during the Divine Liturgy (when the Priest says 'Your Own of Your Own we offer You, In every way and for every Thing'. This is the point when the Priest prays with the people for God to make the Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.
10. At the end of the Lord's Prayer while the Priest says 'For Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.'
11. Before and after receiving Holy Communion
12. Before receiving Antidoron (The blessed bread at the end of the service).

When to Stand, Sit or Kneel during the Divine Liturgy

Stand and Sit during the Following Times:

1. Stand at the beginning of the Liturgy at 'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever...' until the end of the Great Litany at 'For to You belong all glory, power and worship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...' Sit after the Priest has finished this last phrase.
2. Stand when the procession with the Gospel begins (this is called the Small Entrance and symbolises the coming of Christ into the world). Stay standing until the beginning of the Epistle reading, at the beginning of which we may sit.
3. Stand when the Gospel is to be read, stand when you hear the Priest say 'Wisdom. Attend. Let us hear the Holy Gospel. Peace be with you all'. Stay standing after the Gospel and through the Procession with the Gifts for Holy Communion (this is called the Great Entrance and symbolises Christ coming to His Passion). We can sit after the Priest has placed the Gifts upon the Altar, when we hear him say 'Let us complete our prayer to the Lord'.
4. Stand when we hear the Priest say 'Commemorating our All-Holy, most pure, blessed, and glorious Lady, Theotokos and ever virgin Mary' and 'Through the mercies of Your only begotten Son with Whom You are blessed'. Kneel when you hear the Priest saying 'Your Own from Your Own we offer You in every way and for every Thing' (On Sundays and between Pascha and Pentecost it is a custom to Bow instead of kneel at this time because these are periods of celebrating the Resurrection) Keep standing through the Creed and until the Priest says 'Having commemorated all the Saints, again and again in peace let us pray to the Lord...'
5. Stand for the Lord's Prayer when you hear the Priest say 'And make us worthy Master...' then the 'Our Father'. Keep standing until you hear the Priest say 'Let us attend. The Holy Things are for the Holy.'
6. Stand when the Priest comes out with Holy Communion. While Holy Communion is being distributed some people like to keep standing out of respect for Christ's physical presence in the Eucharist while others sit. You make a choice here.
7. Stand when Holy Communion is finished and keep standing until the end of the Service.
8. Sit when the Priest is preaching.

The Priesthood in the Orthodox Church

The Clergy in the Orthodox Church are the ordained leaders of the Community. St. Paul says in the Bible that they will answer before God for the people in their care. Their responsibility is very great and they are heavily involved with the people of their community. During their ordination the people must give their approval by calling out Worthy during the Sacrament of Ordination. The community has high expectations of the clergy and generally has much love for it as well.

There are three orders within the ordained ministry of the Orthodox Church. A Deacon is the first step in ordination. The Deacon helps at services, in parishes, or may be attached as an assistant to a Bishop. He is not given authority to lead services on his own and thus he cannot officiate at the Eucharist or other Sacraments on his own. A Priest (also known as a Presbyter) is the second level in the ministry. He is vested with the authority to lead worship and officiate at all Sacraments except that of Ordination, which only a Bishop can effect. The Priest is usually assigned a Parish in which he ministers both the Word of God and the Sacraments. Like the Deacon he is allowed to marry so long as he does so before ordination. His wife, because of her special role as Mother in the community is called Presbyteria. Presbyteria is the feminine form of the word Presbyter, which literally translated from Greek means Elder. The Deacon's wife is called Diaconisa. The highest level of Ordination is that of the Bishop. Ultimately he carries most responsibility before God for the community. In Greek he is called Episkopo which literally translated means Overseer. All Bishops are equal in the Orthodox Church, and there is nothing like the Pope as Supreme Pontiff. For administrative reasons there are Bishops who have a title that equates to extra responsibilities, such as Archbishop or Metropolitan. Since the 7th century, Orthodox Canon Law has not allowed married men into the Episcopacy.

All clergy in the Orthodox Church can trace their ordination through the laying on of hands to the Apostles. This is called Apostolic Succession and is very important from an Orthodox point of view in safeguarding our apostolic inheritance. It is a strong Orthodox custom to show respect toward the Priest as one responsible before God for leading the community. One physical expression of this is to kiss his hand. This is an ancient custom signifying respect and love. The Church believes there is a blessing for the person who does this.

Forms of Address for Clergy

Bishops: Archbishop — Your Eminence

Bishop — Your Grace

Priests: All — Father

Priest's Wife — Presbyteria

Deacons: All — Deacon

Deacon's Wife — Deaconess

Again I hope the above has been a useful guide for you. Remember when in doubt just ask !!!

*Taken from "Voice in the Wilderness", Vol. 8, No. 3, July-Sept. 2000
published by the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George, Brisbane QLD*