

## **A Guide to Church Etiquette**

The Church is the Body of Christ on earth, the fellowship of the faithful. It is the “Ecclesia”, the gathering of the people of God who assemble to worship together the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a consequence of their belief in Christ, as Son of the living God, they have been baptized, chrismated and receive His precious Body and Blood regularly. They have chosen to help and love one another as Christ Himself commanded. They repent for their shortcomings which offend God’s law and receive forgiveness. They seek God’s help and the help of their fellow Christians to do better.

If our faith needs practical expression, then we need the Church. A vague belief in God, a few occasional moments of something like devotional feeling, and a good deed once in a while, are hardly a real expression of the Orthodox Christian Faith. To do a good job in anything requires organization. Every good idea and goal must be planned well in order to be successful. The Church, a living organism, is a treasury, a storehouse of centuries of accumulated wisdom in humanity’s efforts to relate to God and all people. Truly, what we know of our Faith we have ultimately received from the Church, as well as, the church in the home. Those of us who have received and cherished this heritage have an obligation – a duty – to pass it on to future generations. It takes this organization we call “Church” to give Christianity to those who will follow. This is why we need to be “active” and “concerned” members of Christ’s Body – His Church!

Please note that in the Holy Gospels, God offers us a new life. The Church and only the Church brings that Gospel to the people. No other group or organization shares God’s gift of life in Christ.

It is a blessing to present this booklet regarding “**Church Etiquette**”. May of the things in this text have been taught to us by our grandparents and parents, while others may not have had this opportunity. In either case, it is time to clarify several practical expressions of our Christian Orthodox Faith.

### **1. Church Conduct**

When attending Divine Services we all have the responsibility of maintaining proper decorum and atmosphere in the church. The very first thing to keep in mind is that we are to be at Divine Services on time.

Remember! The church is the House of God. Reverence and good manners are required at all times. No irreverent or irrelevant conversations should go on in the Narthex or in the church proper. There are certain times during the Divine Services when no one should be moving about or entering the church or being seated at a pew. Wherever a person happens to be at these moments, he or she

should stop and stand reverently until the proper moment to be seated. These times are:

1. During the Doxology, while the priest is censuring.
2. During the Small Entrance - The procession of the priest and altar boys with the Holy Gospel.
3. When the priest censes the Altar, icons, and congregation throughout the Divine Liturgy.
4. During the reading of the Epistle and Gospel.
5. During the sermon.
6. During the Great Entrance - the procession of the priest and altar boys with the Holy Gifts.
7. During the recitation of the Creed and Lord's Prayer.
8. During the Consecration of the Holy Gifts. (See Imnomen)
9. During Holy Communion. To receive Holy Communion the faithful should come forth from the side aisles and exit via the center aisle to return to their pew.
10. When receiving any sacrament of the church, use your baptismal/chrismanation name.
11. During any special services such as Memorials or Artoclasia, special doxologies, etc.

The general rule is that whenever the priest is outside the Holy Altar either with the censer or for giving a blessing, there should be no movement in the church. Also, we remind everyone that we should attend the Divine Liturgy and all services of divine worship from the beginning.

Please remember that Parish Council members are obligated to maintain order and decorum in the church during worship.

## **2. Lighting Candles**

When an Orthodox Christian enters the narthex of the church, he/she makes the sign of the Cross, makes an offering for a candle, venerates all the icons, and lights the candle while saying a prayer. Candles are lit as an expression of our belief that Jesus Christ is the "Light of the world."

A candle may be lit for the health and well being of someone or in memory of a departed loved one. In particular, the seven day candles may be lit for the same reasons. The seven day candles are placed in the special stands located down each side aisle. Please remember the procedure for when one should enter during Divine Services.

Godparents of newly baptized and/or chrismated Church members may come down to light candles when the Priest calls the faithful to receive the Holy Eucharist "With the fear of God, with faith and with love", even though the Priest is facing the congregation.

### **3. Venerating Icons**

"The saints, during their earthly life, are filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. After their departure the same grace remains in their souls as in their bodies. The very same grace is present and active in their sacred images and icons" (St. John of Damascus). It is the practice of the Church to venerate, not worship icons. The Orthodox Church calls for the elaborate use of symbolism and iconography in the interior decoration of the church building. Icons are not simply portraits representing people, but graphic presentations of spiritual truths that are visual aids to contemplation and prayer. When we venerate icons the honor is directed to Christ or to the Saint depicted on the icon, not to the wood, paint, or colors of the icon.

In the Orthodox Church the icons bear witness to the reality of God's presence with us in the mystery of faith. We are to look beyond the external and deep into the spiritual meaning of living the Christian life. Icons are the witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom of God to us, and so our own presence to the Kingdom of God in the Church. It is in the Orthodox Christian Faith that icons are not only permissible, but are spiritually necessary because **"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14)**. Christ is truly man and, as man, truly the **"icon of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15, 1 Cor. 11:7, 2 Cor. 4:4)**.

### **4. Sign of the Cross**

We make the sign of the Cross as a public profession of our Orthodox Christian faith. The first two fingers and thumb of the right hand come together symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The two remaining fingers symbolize the Humanity and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in our right hand, we hold the two major doctrines of our Christian Orthodox Church each time we make the sign of the Cross.

We make the sign of the Cross before we eat, sleep, drive, pass by, enter or leave the church, travel or begin any major endeavor, acknowledging our desire to include God in these activities. In church, make the sign of the Cross:

1. When you venerate the icons;

2. When you light a candle;
3. If you are an Altar Boy when you enter the Holy Altar and when you pass behind the Altar;
4. When you hear “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” “the Theotokos,” “Peace be to all;”
5. When the priest censes in your direction;
6. At the end of the Gospel reading;
7. During the Creed when we say Articles 8 and 9: “And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life...” and “In one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church;”
8. Before and after receiving Holy Communion.

## **5. Posture in Church**

### **A. Standing and/or Sitting:**

The proper posture in which we attend church is to stand throughout Divine Services. Since we do have pews in our church, there are moments when you may be permitted to sit down. Please follow the direction given by the Priest as to when it is the acceptable time to be seated. If, however, you wish to stand throughout the service, please do so near the back so that the view of the Holy Altar is not blocked for those who are seated.

While sitting during the service, one is not to observe the service as you would a movie or a TV show. Divine Services are not meant to “entertain” but to call the people of God to be attentive and worship Him. Therefore, it is not appropriate to posture yourself in a casual manner, such as crossing the legs or arms in church.

### **B. Kneeling:**

During Divine Services there may be appropriate times to kneel. Kneeling is an expression of prayer that has two characteristics: penance and/or prayer. Commemorating the Resurrection each Sunday, the Canons of the Church prohibit kneeling.

Recognizing the sanctity of the descent of the Holy Spirit during the Consecration of the Holy Gifts, it is acceptable to kneel in prayer at that time during the Divine Liturgy. Please remember, however, that from Pascha to Pentecost Sunday, in celebration of the Resurrection, we do not kneel. Following the Divine Liturgy of the Pentecost Sunday, the Service of Kneeling is prayed and at that time, we resume kneeling as an expression of prayer.

### **C. Touching the Priest’s Vestments:**

One of the pious practices of the Church is to reach out and touch the Priest’s vestments as he passes by in the Great Entrance. This practice is in imitation of the woman who was healed by touching the hem of Christ’s robe (see Matt. 9:20-

22). When touching the Priest's vestments, one should not step into the procession, pull on or tug at the vestments or push anyone away.

## **6. When Should One Receive Holy Communion**

As frequently as possible. However, this is the greatest of responsibilities. Preparation to receive Holy Communion includes fasting and the reading of the communion prayers. One should not receive Holy Communion unless he/she has made serious preparation to do so, which may also include scheduling the Holy Sacrament of Confession prior to receiving Holy Communion. When the Priest chants: "With the fear of God, with faith and with love draw near", an invitation is given to join oneself to the purity and beauty of the life in God.

## **7. Children in Church**

"Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matt. 19:14) Our Christian Orthodox Church baptizes and chrismates children at a young age to make them full members of the Body of Christ, the Church. As members of the Church, parents are to instruct them to be respectful and quiet during Divine Services. Please be mindful of fellow worshippers if a child becomes too disruptive please go into the "Cry Room" as quietly as possible. Once the child has calmed down, come back into the church. This is where they belong but remember that we come to church to pray and to worship God.

It is never appropriate to allow a child to run down or play in the aisles. In addition, toys that make noise are not permitted in church. Children should be taken to the restroom before church begins; do not allow them to come and go during Divine Services.

Should a young child need a snack, please clear away any leftover pieces. The child should not have anything in his/her mouth when coming forward to receive Holy Communion. Remember, it is strictly forbidden to chew gum in church at any time and by anyone.

It is a good practice to bring young children to church when Divine Services are not scheduled so that they might learn proper church behavior. They should be taught that the church is God's House and that special manners are expressed there.

## **8. Greeting the Clergy**

The Orthodox Christian respects and loves the clergy. Knowing that the clergy are servants of God and man, devoting their life for the salvation of their flock, the Orthodox Christian expresses his/her gratitude and respect to them on every occasion.

When speaking with the Clergy the following terms are proper:

1. To the Patriarch of Constantinople: "Your All-Holiness";
2. To all other Patriarchs: "Your Beatitude";
3. To the Archbishop/Metropolitan: "Your Eminence";
4. To the Bishop: "Your Grace";
5. To a Priest: "Father";
6. To a Deacon: "Deacon".

Orthodox Christians address the Priest as "Father", for he is the spiritual father of his flock; he is their teacher, confessor, sanctifier, and healer. There are people that belong to Christian denominations that do not call their clergy, "Father". But let us consider the words of St. Paul, "For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15). When we also read the gospel according to St. Luke, we find the rich man calling up to Abraham in heaven with Lazarus in his bosom and addressing him as "Father Abraham" (See Luke 16:20-31). Abraham's response was not, "Do you not realize that only God the Father is to be called Father?" Rather, he replied, "Son, remember."

When people greet a Hierarch or a Priest they kiss his hand as an expression of respect, as recognition of his Priesthood, and as a veneration to the holiness of his sacred office and duties. The proper way to do this is to approach the Clergyman with right hand over the left, palms facing up and then bow slightly while saying, "Master, bless" to a Hierarch; "Father, bless" to the Priest.

The fact that the Hierarch/Priest handles the Holy of Holies, that is, the Body and Blood of Christ, when he offers the Divine Liturgy, is recognized by Orthodox people, at all time throughout the world, as a great and awesome privilege. The hands that touch and offer the Bloodless Sacrifice on the Holy Altar; the hands that give to us the Body and Blood of Christ; the hands that baptize and anoint us with Holy Chrism; the hands that absolve us in the Sacrament of Penance; the hands that bless our wedlock in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony and anoint our bodies with the healing oil of the Sacrament of Holy Unction; the hands that sprinkle upon us the Holy Water of Sanctification; the hands that bless us, alive and dead, these hands are the instruments of salvation. For this reason Orthodox Christians through the centuries have kissed the hand of the Hierarch/Priest when he is greeted either in church when he distributes the "Antidoron" at the end of the Divine Liturgy or outside the church whenever he is present.

Listen to the words of St. Paul: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith; Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings. Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give an account. Let

them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:7-9, 13, 17).

## 9. Church Attire

Coming to church involves preparation of oneself for a serious and sacred encounter and is not a casual experience! We dress accordingly out of love and respect for our Lord who we meet in a mystical manner in church each time we celebrate the Divine Services.

Our clothing reveals much about us – our lifestyle, outlook on life, and even our self-esteem. When it comes to Church attendance, our clothing can convey many messages: modesty, discretion, simplicity, indifference or vanity. For Orthodox Christians, there are several principles that must be considered in referring to what is appropriate attire for church.

As Christians we are called to offer to Christ our best in all areas of our life, and the same is true of our attire. There was a time when people referred to times when they wore their “Sunday best.” In the past, dress clothes were often referred to as “Sunday clothes” because people wore their very best to church. When we dress up for Church it is a reflection of the importance we place on church attendance.

An important word to keep in mind is respect – respect for God, respect for oneself, and respect for those in whom we share in Christian Orthodox fellowship. Equally as important as respect is - modesty. We should dress modestly, not in a flashy way that would call attention to us. We must also realize that many of the styles that are popular today, especially among young people, are not appropriate for Church. For example, exposed midriffs, pants or skirts worn very low, t-shirts with any kind of writing or slogans, shorts and mini-skirts, along with any kind of extreme hairstyles, or body-piercing and exposed tattoos, are not appropriate for either men or women. Also, not appropriate are tank-tops and sleeveless shirts, or tops that are low cut in either the front or back. Women’s dresses and skirts should be at or below the knee in length.

One more thing to consider is that proper church attire means that men and women wear clothing that is particular to their sex. God created us “male and female” and the distinctions between the sexes are important. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read that “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord” (Deut. 22:5).

For this reason, and to reinforce our Christian teachings in relation to the distinction between the sexes, the Church continues to ask men and women to dress in a manner appropriate to their sex. It is true that styles change and, certainly, we must acknowledge that it is more of an issue for women than men since men’s styles have not really changed much over time. As a result, it has

become common in many places for women to wear pants to Church. However, we must realize that it is still the commonly accepted practice of the Church that women wear dresses or skirts when attending Divine Liturgy and other services.

One final point that is of paramount importance is that we should not focus on what other people are wearing but, instead, focus on ourselves and our own spiritual life. Remember, judging others is a far greater sin than dressing inappropriately. Look within yourself and evaluate where your priorities are and make sure that your own attire reflects your faith as an Orthodox Christian.

## **10. More To Consider When Attending Divine Services**

- \* Refrain from socializing during Divine Services. Communicating with fellow parishioners should be done during Fellowship Hour. In Divine Services our focus must be on God and in bringing ourselves to worship Him.
- \* Please remember to turn off your cell phone and/or pager during the celebration of Divine Services. Texting is also prohibited when attending Divine Services. If there is a professional or emergency situation that requires one to have access to a cell phone, it should be kept on “silent” or “vibrate”. In this case, one should sit at the end of a pew so that should there be an emergency, it will not be a distraction for others when leaving.
- \* Avoid reserving seats for family or friends that may come late to Divine Services. Make room for all that come to attend Divine Services and in particular, visitors so that they feel welcomed.
- \* When venerating an icon, the cross, when receiving Holy Communion, or kissing the hand of the Clergy, please do not wear lipstick.
- \* One must be attentive when attending Divine Services. Crossing of the legs or arms is considered disrespectful when attending Divine Services.
- \* It is not appropriate to gather in the Fellowship Hall, the kitchen, administrative offices or Classroom Building during Divine Services.
- \* Chewing gum in church is never permitted.
- \* Only Sunday Church School teachers and students are permitted to depart early from the Divine Liturgy. They will do so following the Holy Eucharist.
- \* Once Divine Services have concluded, please depart from church appropriately. This may mean that the faithful come forward to receive the Antidoron or venerate the cross held by the Priest.
- \* When receiving the Antidoron at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy, please remember to venerate the hand of the Priest and try not to drop the crumbs since this bread is offered as a blessing.

## **11. Photography and Videography in the Church**

To insure the proper dignity and solemnity of Divine Services, in particular, weddings and baptisms, pictures/videos may only be taken if the photographer/videographer speaks with the Parish Priest at least one half hour prior to the service.

## 12. Memorial Services

“Koliva” is the name given to the mixture of boiled wheat, sugar and other ingredients (such as raisins, almonds and spices) which are presented at Memorial Services. Following the Memorial Services, the Koliva is passed to the whole congregation. It is traditional for faithful, as they eat the Koliva to say, “May God forgive him/her!”

Wheat early became a symbol of the Resurrection which we expect, based on Christ’s word, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit**” (John 12:24). Thus, the wheat becomes a symbol of what we confess in the Creed: “I wait for the resurrection of the dead; and the life of the ages to come.”

Memorials are offered the fortieth day after death, and on the first anniversary of one’s death, after three years and then once a year thereafter, if the family wishes.

## 13. Blessing of the Loaves

The Orthodox Christian family prepares the Five Loaves of special sweet bread for the Artoklasia Service, usually offered at the conclusion of Great Vespers or the Divine Liturgy. This service, a remnant of the Supper of Love in the Ancient Church, is a reminder of the miracle of the feeding of the Five Thousand with five loaves of bread (see Mark 6:38-44), and a thanksgiving for the virtuous lives of the Saints, their martyrdom, zeal, and love for **Christ**.

During the service, the Priest offers prayers for the enlightenment and salvation of those who prepared and offered the loaves, and of all the faithful present. This service is usually performed on the feastday of the local parish or for a special feastday or occasion.