

# CHURCH ETIQUETTE

## *OR SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW WHILE IN CHURCH*

by Father David Barr

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 usually are no pews in the churches. Chairs or benches on the side walls are usually reserved for the elderly and infirm. In 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 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 we not sit? Always stand 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. The Divine Liturgy book has suggested times when sitting is acceptable. Follow those instructions (it’s probably safer than following what the people do in the first couple of rows). When in doubt, stand. It is never wrong to stand in Church.

## Kneeling at the Consecration

Many parishes also follow the practice of kneeling on Sundays during the consecration of the Gifts (at weekday liturgies, it is considered normative to kneel at the consecration). Strictly speaking, it is not correct to kneel on most Sundays, because Sunday is a "little Pascha" in which the Resurrection is remembered - hence, no kneeling. The "kneeling prayers" said five weeks after Pascha are said after the Sunday Liturgy, "reinstating" kneeling for Vespers, Matins, and weekday Liturgies only. If the tradition of the parish is to kneel, and everyone kneels, it's better to do so than to stick out like a sore thumb. If there is a mixture of standing and kneeling, then feel free to stand.

## 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 Entrance, 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). Other than that, it is probably all right to light a candle.

## Entering Church (Late)

We all know that the time to arrive to church is before the service starts, but for some unknown reason, it has become custom—or rather a 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. By the way, the best way to avoid this problem is to arrive on time—then you don't have to wonder if it's OK to come in or not.

## Crossing Those Legs?

In some Orthodox cultures, crossing one's legs is taboo and considered to be very disrespectful. In our American culture, while there are no real taboos concerning crossing one's legs, we tend to cross our legs to get comfortable when 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, sitting in church is a concession, not the normative way of prayer. We surely don't want to get too relaxed and let our minds wander off too much. In fact, when we do sit in church, we should sit attentively—and not too comfortably. When sitting in church, keep those feet on the floor, ready to stand in attention (which is what "Let us attend" means). Cross yourself with your fingers and hand—but don't cross your legs!

## In and Out

In and Out? It's a hamburger chain in LA, but shouldn't be traffic patterns 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 planning on

taking Holy Communion). Don't come to church to go to the fellowship hall—come to pray.

## Leaving before the 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 the 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 our agenda. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God's holiness. Eat and run at McDonald's—but stay to 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, and the communion spoon. Icons have been ruined by lipstick; and even though the cross can 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 hand. Even better, wait until after church to put it on. After all, God is not impressed with how attractive we look externally—our make-up or clothing, but how attractive we look internally—our 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) an icon, pay attention 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 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 as you would 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 into 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 the other people in church who are trying to worship. Talk to God while in church and to your friends in the hall afterwards.

## Kissing the Priest's and Bishop's Hand

Did you know that the proper way to greet a priest or bishop is ask his blessing and kiss his right hand? How do we do this? Approach the priest or bishop with your right hand over your left hand and say "Father (or Master), 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 we kiss their hands we show respect for their office—they are the ones who "bless and

sanctify us” and who offer the holy gifts on our behalf. So next time you greet your priest or bishop, don’t shake his hand, ask for his blessing. And blot your lipstick before you kiss their hands!

## 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. This is not as 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.

*Here are some specific guidelines we use in our parish:*

### **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 should not be cut low in the front. If women wear pants to church, they should be dress pants (and not shorts, jeans, etc.). And please, no belly buttons showing! Tops should be low enough and pants high enough to fully cover the midriff.

**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 (no one wants to see your hairy chest!). Slacks should be clean. Nice or dress jeans are OK, but worn looking jeans are too casual for church (especially ones with patches and holes). And guys (or should we say “dudes?”), sagging is not acceptable. We don’t want to see your boxers.

**Everyone:**

It is considered stylish to wear jeans or pants with holes in them. Such really isn’t appropriate for church wear. Church clothes should be in decent repair and modest. Old clothes are appropriate for mowing the lawn, but not for worship.

If you’re going someplace 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, we don’t go to be seen by everyone else—we go to meet God. And, we don’t want to be a distraction to anyone else and get in his or her way of meeting God at Church.

**Electronic Gadgets (or “*Things to Leave in the Car*”)**

With all of the new electronic gadgets we have today (cell phones, pagers, Palm Pilots, handheld games, iPods, etc.), it is important to remember that most, if not all, are not appropriate for church. Even if your cell phone plays “It is truly meet...” when it rings, we really don’t want to hear it during services. So, turn off your cell phone or pager (or at least turn it to vibrate) when you enter the church and leave your Walkman, CD player, iPod, Game Boy,

laptop, Palm Pilot, etc., in the car. You really don't want everyone to look at you when your phone rings, do you?

## 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 pew blockers come early so they can get the coveted aisle seats and then be sure that no one can get past them. The most effective form of pew blocking takes place when two people take their places on 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 who just can't handle sitting in the middle of a pew, take the outside aisle spot and graciously allow those coming after you to go past you (by moving out for them so they can get by). Remember, pew blocking isn't welcoming—nor is it an efficient system 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 really 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 liturgical services



and your private prayers; before venerating an icon; entering or exiting the church and when passing in front of the holy altar table; when blessed with the cross or Gospel book by a bishop or priest.

### **Not to Cross:**

At the chalice before or after taking communion; when the priest or bishop blesses saying “Peace be to all.” with only his hand—bow slightly and receive the blessing; during the six psalms during Orthros (even when “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...” is said); 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).

When crossing yourself, don't be sloppy. We're not strumming the old banjo, we are blessing ourselves. Using your right hand, hold your thumb, index and middle fingers together with the other two against the palm. Make the cross by touching your forehead with the three fingers (thumb and index and middle fingers) and then straight down to your waist (below your navel), then to your right shoulder and finally to the left shoulder. An abbot on Mt. Athos once told me that the demons laugh at us when we make the sign of the cross poorly or sloppily. So be careful to do it well—it will bring a blessing.

## **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 we “attach” our personal prayers to the prayers of the entrance with the holy gifts. At the same time, we 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 the young children have been sitting in the church. The telltale 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 (1-2 years old), this is fine. But by the time the kids get 3-4 years old, they should be able to go through liturgy without eating anything. And by the time they reach 7, they should begin fasting on Sunday morning for communion (or at least making an attempt at fasting by cutting back on the amount of breakfast and eating “fasting” type foods). 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 and keep the snack mess down to a minimum. The floor shouldn’t be covered with Cheerios.

## Gum

It is never appropriate to chew gum during Church services—and is probably best left at home. Same goes for candy and mints.

## Nursery, Cry Room or in Church?

Where should the children be on Sunday mornings? This might just be the most controversial of all these etiquette question. There are a lot of opinions on this, but it seems that the Church has been fairly clear throughout its history. Baptized children are full members of the Church, they are communicants, and thus are welcome and encouraged to be in church. Our Lord told us, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14) Children have the same right as adults to be in church. And we should always encourage them to be there. As they become used to being in church, their behavior will get better. Besides, how do we know that they are not

worshipping in their own way? Sometimes I think small children make noise because they see the angels that we adults are too sinful to see. Bring some soft toys or books for your children to play with (we have some in the Narthex of our Church for the kids). If they start to cry or scream, take them out for a few minutes and let them settle down. But encourage them to be in church that they too may worship the Holy Trinity and experience “how good the Lord is.”

## Head Coverings

Not too many years ago, virtually every woman wore a head covering in church. A wide variety of hats, doilies, and scarves were a part of every Orthodox woman’s Sunday wardrobe. In many churches today, wearing head coverings has virtually disappeared while in others it seems to be making a comeback. In I Corinthians 11, St. Paul addresses the wearing of head coverings in church for both men and women along with a discussion of the length of men’s hair. What was St. Paul teaching? First of all, he was instructing the Christians in Corinth not to be like those in the world (where the men in pagan religions would grow their hair long and then cover their heads before praying and prophesying). It is a great temptation to take our own cultural trends into church with us. St. Paul was telling them not to be like the world—not to take pagan practices into the church with them. Secondly, he was telling them to observe the customs of the church—and not to try to stand out or be different. We must be careful not to be too literal in our interpretation of this passage. For example, in the church today, many male monastics do not cut their hair and wear a head covering in church (and even our clergy at times wear head coverings in church). Is this what St. Paul was talking about? I doubt it. If we interpret St. Paul too literally, we might deduct that no man should wear a hat in church (including clergy and monastics) and that all women should always wear a head covering. What does this have to do with head coverings in the church today?

If it is the custom in a parish for the women to wear head coverings, we should respect the custom and participate with it. If it is not the practice in a particular parish, we should not judge the parish or the women in it. Wearing a head covering is a good thing when it comes organically out of piety, modesty, and humility. At the same time, a head covering should never be a fashion statement or a statement of piety (“I’m more pious because I cover my head....”). And if some want to wear a head covering and others do not, that should be fine with everyone. If there are any questions on this in a particular parish, talk to the pastor.

## A Final Thought

North American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is rather casual in its approach to life. Don’t allow this prevailing attitude to enter into your Orthodox Christian piety. There are surely a lot of other areas that could be covered here (and if you let me know of some particular need, I would be happy to address it). Most 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.