

Church Etiquette

It has been brought to my attention that, by the Grace of God, having a number of inquirers, catechumens and Orthodox relatively young in the faith, certain practical topics need to be addressed regarding Church Etiquette. These are things which many - but certainly not all - born into the faith take for granted.

WHAT IS CHURCH ETIQUETTE?

By definition, etiquette is the set of rules or customs that control accepted behavior in particular social groups or situations. Church etiquette is proper behavior in the church or on the grounds, by which we show respect to God, the Temple of God, the clergy and one another.

Etiquette is important within an Orthodox church, because the church is a sacred place that deserves respect, reverence, and attentiveness. We, as Christians, should reflect the image of Christ both externally and internally at all times. And how much more so should we make the effort when inside the very House of God?

WHAT TO WEAR TO AN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Every Christian (and non-Christians, too) should use their best judgment before entering the church. The church is the House of God. It's not just any ordinary place. When we enter, we do so humbly. We dress as modestly and respectfully as we can, because we are in the presence of God Himself.

For men, this means wearing clean pants and collared, button-up shirts or sweaters. Coats are acceptable. Women are avoid tight clothing, low-cut and sleeveless tops, open backs and shorter-than-knee-length skirts or dresses (the closer to full length the better). Women are asked to cover their heads, according to the words of the Holy Apostle Paul (1 Cor 11) and traditional Orthodox piety. This is a wonderful way to be modest and express humility before God and remove temptation from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The way Orthodox Christians dress, both in and outside the temple, reflects their way of life and dedication to and fear of God. We dress modestly at all times, not in a flashy or provocative way that brings attention to ourselves. We go to church to worship God, not to make a fashion statement.

ENTERING THE CHURCH

ARRIVE BEFORE THE SERVICE STARTS

Arriving before the service gives us plenty of time to say personal prayers, light candles, venerate icons, find a place to stand or sit (if necessary), and spiritually prepare for the service. If you are a visitor, it also gives you the opportunity to take in everything around you.

Arriving late is inconsiderate to God, the clergy and the faithful gathered together as it is often distracting. If you do happen to be late for whatever

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reason, enter the temple quietly and try to figure out what is happening. There are a few times when you should **not** enter the nave of the church:

- Anytime the priest is standing in front of the Holy Doors in the center of the church; this applies whether he is facing the congregation or has his back to them.
- During the recitation of the Creed or the Lord's Prayer
- Whenever the priest is out of the altar, censuring the congregation, carrying the Holy Gospel, carrying the Holy Gifts, or giving the sermon.
- During the reading of the Epistle or Gospel
- While the Holy Gifts are being consecrated

If you arrive while any of these things are happening, wait quietly in the back until they have concluded. Unsure if it is okay to enter the church? Ask!

SAY A PRAYER

Just as we prepare our bodies for entering an Orthodox church by dressing with modesty, we should also prepare our souls and minds with prayer. Your prayer can be as simple as making the sign of the cross. Some people quietly pray the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Others may read or recite Psalm 83, or say something else from their prayer books.

VENERATE THE ICONS

When you enter an Orthodox church, you will see quite a few holy images, of saints, the Theotokos, or Christ Himself. In Orthodox tradition, we venerate these icons and pay honor and respect (**not** worship!) to those pictured in them. Orthodox venerate the icons by crossing themselves and then kissing the icon. Once you venerate the icons, find a place to stand or sit (if necessary).

HOW TO PROPERLY VENERATE ICONS

When in an Orthodox Church, you should always practice proper etiquette when venerating icons. This can perplex many who visit for the first time. If you are not yet Orthodox and this practice makes you uncomfortable, please know you do not have to venerate the icons. However, if you do decide to, here are a couple guidelines to help you:

- Cross yourself twice, kiss the icon or incline your head toward it, and then cross yourself a third time.
- Kiss the hands or feet of those pictured in the icons, not the face.
- You may also kiss the Gospel book, scroll or cross in the hand of the saint, if they are depicted in the icon.
- Do not venerate icons while wearing lipstick or lip balm – this can damage them.

LIGHT A CANDLE AND SUBMIT NAMES FOR COMMEMORATION

Orthodox Christians often light a candle(s) and offer prayers, either for our personal needs or for those of family members or friends. Candles are available for a small donation.

You may also, for a modest donation, obtain prosphora and submit the names of Orthodox Christians, both living - for their health and salvation, and for the reposed - for the remission of their sins, to be remembered at the Preparation (when the gifts which will be offered are prepared). Many Orthodox Christians have a booklet of names which they submit before the Liturgy, but also commemorate at home in their personal prayers.

Remember, only Orthodox Christians can be remembered at the Liturgy. Inquirers, Catechumens the heterodox and all others can and should be commemorated in our personal prayers.

RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

In the Orthodox Church, we participate in what we call *monogamous communion*. This means that **only baptized and christened Orthodox Christians can receive Holy Communion during services**. Why? Because the Church is Christ's own Body (1 Cor. 12:27), His Bride (Rev. 21:9), the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), God's field and building (1 Cor. 3:9), and the Vine to which individual members are then grafted in (Rom. 11:17). And the Lord set an example for us by distributing the Last Supper to His disciples alone. Only when you have been grafted into the Vine and become a member of the Body can you partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Guests who are not Orthodox are welcome to partake of antidoron, or blessed bread, which is distributed to everyone after dismissal, along with a blessing.

QUICK RULE OF THUMB:

If an Orthodox Christian arrives late to the Divine Liturgy, he or she should refrain from receiving Holy Communion. When we plan to partake of the Eucharist, we fast from food and drink from midnight onward and prepare spiritually through prayer.

We are already unworthy of the Holy Gifts; therefore, it would be unwise to further compound that unworthiness by partaking of them after showing up late or preparing inadequately.

HOW AND WHEN TO CROSS YOURSELF

Another common question many people have about etiquette in Orthodox churches concerns the sign of the cross. How are you supposed to do it? When? Let's answer each of those one at a time.

How: Join the thumb, index, and middle fingertips of your right hand, resting the other two fingers against your palm. Take that hand and touch the

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joined fingertips to your forehead, and then to your abdomen. After this, touch your right shoulder, and then your left.

When: In the Orthodox tradition, we cross ourselves on many occasions, most commonly when entering or exiting the temple, when we hear the name of the All-Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whenever so moved by prayer.

BRINGING CHILDREN TO SERVICES

Children need to be in Church, especially those baptized as infants. They have the grace of God and this grace needs to be nourished by their being present in the Church. (This does not mean that this is sufficient - it must be nurtured at home at all times). The icons, the singing, the sweet aroma of incense, the sweetness of the Divine Communion: this all has a profound effect on a child from the very beginning.

If you are a guest, an inquirer or catechumen, your child will also greatly benefit by coming to Church with you. The Grace of God present in the temple of God nurtures all those present, especially children, as they are without guile.

Children are children and cannot be still as adults (should be). But as long as they are not disruptive, don't worry. Let them kiss the icons and look around. If your child becomes disruptive, take him outside for a short while, but come back as soon as he is ready.

When we attend church services, we participate in the Divine Services for no other reason than to worship God. Therefore:

DON'T TALK DURING SERVICES

One of the rudest things we can do when we are supposed to worship God is to chat with someone inside the temple. Talking during the liturgy distracts others from their worship; it serves as a stumbling block to your brothers and sisters, which St. Paul tells us we should never do (Romans 14:13).

Don't worry about "ignoring" someone. No one will find your focus on God (and not on them) rude. A simple smile is enough to let them know you are happy to see them, and will gladly catch up with them later.

DON'T TEXT OR TAKE PHONE CALLS

Your conversations from the outside world can wait. You are in church to worship God; He deserves your full, undivided attention.

And while this may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised how many times a phone will go off in the middle of liturgy. Please remember to silence (**do not disturb**, not vibrate) your phone or turn it off completely. If you have an emergency, you can step out of the temple to make/take a call.

DON'T WEAR LIPSTICK OR GLOSS

This one is mainly for the ladies. We have many holy objects within the church that the faithful venerate, like the Gospel, the Cross, and the holy icons and relics. Lipstick can ruin these sacred objects. Thus, we recommend simply not wearing anything at all on the lips when attending church, whether it's lipstick, gloss, or even chapstick. After all, you come to worship God, not to show off your makeup. God loves you the way He made you – au naturale.

If you absolutely insist on wearing lipstick, blot your lips well before venerating anything, and do not approach the chalice to receive Holy Communion.

True beauty is not found in cosmetics. It radiates from within from a virtuous heart. Even the most wretched sinner can become beautiful through repentance. Everyone who struggles to live according to the commandments of Christ has a certain comeliness, a particular beauty, as each person is an icon of the living God. Therefore the use of cosmetics is greatly discouraged.

DON'T CHEW GUM

Gum chewing during worship distracts those standing near us. And quite frankly, is incredibly rude in most social contexts, but particularly so in God's house.

EXITING THE CHURCH

DON'T LEAVE UNTIL THE SERVICE ENDS

This goes without saying, but we should not leave the church until the service ends. This goes for any service, not just the Divine Liturgy. While the service takes place, you should partake in it with the rest of the parish. Of course, in the case of emergency you can leave. But we should always strive to remain in the temple while we are worshipping God. The coffee and food can wait. Administrative duties can wait. Your favorite TV show can wait. The outside world **can wait**.

We come to church to worship God and give Him thanks, to ask for His mercy, forgiveness and love. When we are here, all our attention must be on Him, not on the distractions that wait for us outside the church's walls. God is more important.

RECEIVE A BLESSING FROM THE PRIEST

Additionally, we should only leave an Orthodox church after receiving the final blessing from the priest, and after venerating the cross in his hand. You do not have to be Orthodox to receive this blessing, so please feel welcome to approach the priest after the service. In many parishes, a reader will remain behind to chant the Prayers of Thanksgiving. If you choose to leave before the reader completes these prayers, please exit the church quietly. Do not stop to have conversations with others, as this can distract others who wish to pray.

VENERATE THE ICONS AGAIN

After receiving the blessing, most Orthodox venerate the icons near the altar and might say a few prayers before heading back to the entrance to the church). In the narthex, they might venerate a few more icons or relics, or perhaps light another candle or two, as they make their way out. After leaving, it is customary to face the entrance of the church, bow, and make the sign of the cross before walking away.

GREETING AN ORTHODOX BISHOP OR PRIEST

Traditionally, laity (regular parishioners) greet priests and bishops by asking their blessing and kissing them on the right hand. The priest or bishop typically extends his hand, which you take in yours as if to shake it. But instead of shaking his hand, you simply kiss the back of it.

GREETING WITH A KISS

In modern American culture, people usually greet each other by shaking hands, hugging, or a peck on the cheek. When greeting a member of the clergy, though, we do things a bit differently. We don't shake his hand or kiss his cheek. Instead, we kiss his right hand and ask for a blessing. We do this because we seek to honor Christ, whom the bishop/priest represents.

HOW TO GREET AN ORTHODOX BISHOP OR PRIEST

Here we explain how to greet a priest or bishop in the Orthodox Church.

1. **Cup your hands in front of you.** Place your right hand over your left, and turn your palms to face upward.
2. **Bow slightly at the waist and say, "Master/Father bless."** Asking for a blessing lets the bishop or priest know that you wish to greet him, and he will bless you with the sign of the cross, extend his hand to you, and place it in your cupped palms.
3. **Kiss the back of the priest or bishop's hand.** This kiss serves as both a greeting and an acceptance of the blessing the bishop/priest has given you.

WHY KISS THEM, THOUGH?

The kiss is an ancient custom signifying love, respect and reverence. The Orthodox keep this practice alive during divine services and fellowship. It is as natural to us as breathing. We kiss icons, holy relics, the Cross, the Gospel, the priest's hand, and the Holy Chalice. And we also often greet each other with a kiss (or two or three) upon the cheek, as people in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have done for centuries. We do this because we encounter and experience Christ Himself through these holy things and through one another. If you ever visit an Orthodox Church, expect to see us kissing things (and each other) quite a bit.

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This kissing of the hand not necessarily restricted to bishops and priest. It is also a traditional way of showing love and respect for ones elders, husband or wife, even children.

WHY ASK FOR A BLESSING?

We greet clergy by asking for and receiving a blessing for a couple reasons.

First, it honors the sacred office of the bishop or priest. After all, the hands of these men touch the Holy Body and Blood of Our Lord. Their hands prepare the Holy Gifts for all of us, so we may partake of Holy Communion and experience God in His fullness. The Orthodox fully recognize that the priest is a man, and that he sins, just like we do. But though he is unworthy, he has received the Grace of God to impart spiritual gifts and blessings.

Secondly, asking for blessings is a sign of a humble heart. It reveals a deep faith in the power of God. For example, the woman with a flow of blood touched Christ's garment to obtain healing, and the Lord praised her great faith. The sinful woman kissed the Lord's feet in repentance (Lk 7:38). And in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father runs out to meet the repentant young man and kisses him (Lk 15:20). The Orthodox follow the examples of these individuals, approaching our clergy with humility and faith.

OTHER TIMES IT IS APPROPRIATE TO KISS THE HAND

The most common use of the hand-kiss in Orthodox tradition and custom is in receiving a blessing from a bishop or priest. But there are other times it might also be acceptable to do this:

- Saying hello or goodbye
- Asking for a blessing before traveling
- Receiving the prayer of absolution at Holy Confession

Greeting Clergy in Person. When we address Deacons or Priests, we should use the title "Father." Bishops we should address as "Your Grace." Though all Bishops (including Patriarchs) are equal in the Orthodox Church, they do have different administrative duties and honors that accrue to their rank in this sense. Thus, "Your Eminence" is the proper title for Metropolitans, and most Archbishops. "Your Beatitude" or "Your Holiness" is the proper title for Patriarchs. When we approach an Orthodox Presbyter or Bishop (but not a Deacon), we make a bow by reaching down and touching the floor with our right hand, place our right hand over the left (palms upward), and say: "Bless, Father" (or "Bless, Your Grace," or "Bless, Your Eminence," etc.). The Priest or Bishop then answers, "May the Lord bless you," blesses us with the Sign of the Cross, and places his right hand in our hands. We kiss then his hand.

We should understand that when the Priest or Bishop blesses us, he forms his fingers to represent the Christogram "ICXC" a traditional abbreviation of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ" (i.e., the first and last letters of each of the words "IHCOYC XRICTOC"). Thus, the Priest's blessing is in the Name of

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Christ, as he emphasizes in his response to the believer's request for a blessing. We should also note that the reason that a lay person kisses the hand of a bishop or priest is to show respect to his Apostolic office. More importantly, however, since both hold the Holy Mysteries in their hands during the Divine Liturgy, we show respect to the Holy Eucharist when we kiss their hands. In fact, Saint John Chrysostomos once said that if one were to meet an Orthodox Priest walking along with an Angel, that he should greet the Priest first and kiss his hand, since that hand has touched the Body and Blood of our Lord. For this latter reason, we do not normally kiss the hand of a Deacon. When we take leave of a bishop or priest, we should again ask for a blessing, just as we did when we first greeted him.

In the case of married clergy, the wife of a priest or deacon is also informally addressed with a title. Since the Mystery of Marriage binds a priest and his wife together as "one flesh," the wife shares in a sense her husband's priesthood. This does not, of course, mean that she has the very Grace of the priesthood or its office, but the dignity of her husband's service certainly accrues to her. The various titles used by the national Churches are listed below. The Greek titles, since they have English correspondents, are perhaps the easiest to use in the West:

Greek: Presbytera (Pres—vee—té—ra)

Russian: Matushka (Má—toosh—ka)

Serbian: Papadiya (Pa—pá—dee—ya)

Ukrainian: Panimatushka (Pa—nee—má—toosh—ka), or Panimatka (Pa—nee—mát—ka)

The wife of a deacon is called "diakonissa [Thee—a—kó—nees—sa]" in Greek. The Slavic Churches commonly use the same title for the wife of a deacon as they do for the wife of a priest. In any case, the wife of a priest should normally be addressed with both her title and her name in informal situations (e.g., "Presbytera Mary," "Diakonissa Sophia," etc.).

Greeting Clergy on the Telephone. Whenever you speak to Orthodox clergy of Priestly rank on the telephone, you should always begin your conversation by asking for a blessing: "Father, bless." When speaking with a bishop, you should say "Bless, Vladika" (or "Master" in English). It is also appropriate to say, "Bless, Your Grace" (or "Your Eminence," etc.). You should end your conversation by asking for a blessing again.

Addressing Clergy in a Letter/email etc... When we write to a clergyman (and, by custom, monastics), we should open our letter with the greeting, "Bless, Father." At the end of the letter, it is customary to close with the following line: "Kissing your right hand...." It is not appropriate to invoke a blessing on a clergyman, as many do: "May God bless you." Not only does this show a certain spiritual arrogance before the image of the cleric, but laymen do not have the Grace of the Priesthood and the prerogative to bless in their stead. Even a Priest properly introduces his letters with the words, "The blessing of the Lord" or "May God bless you," rather than offering his own blessing. Though he can do the latter, humility prevails in his behavior, too.