

## How We Should Conduct Ourselves in Church (Fr. John Whiteford)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



*O Lord, I Have Loved The Beauty of Thy House*  
(Psalms 25:8 (LXX))

I once overheard a Russian American layman having a talk with some altar boys after a service. This man had spent his life in the Church, had obviously done his own tour of duty in the altar, and his comments have stayed with me ever since. He pointed out to them that they should remember that when they were serving, they were images of the angels, and that when the people looked at them they should be spiritually uplifted. He then went on to speak in very practical terms about how they should be thoughtful in their service, should pay attention, look straight ahead, stand still, etc. Anyone who has attended Orthodox services very long has probably also seen the opposite dynamic at work. An altar boy who is fidgeting, picking his nose, or making faces at people in the congregation not only fails to add to the service, but obviously distracts and detracts from it.



What is perhaps less obvious is that it is not only the servers who can add or detract from the solemnity and beauty of the services – this is true of all of us. People talking during the services, a man casually leaning against a wall as he chews gum, a boy wearing bright neon Nikes that light up with his every step, a grandmother making overly demonstrative prostrations at inappropriate times during the service, or a young woman wearing a miniskirt can all be as distracting as a nose-picking altar boy. In fact, when we sing the words of the Cherubic hymn during the liturgy, we affirm that we all “mystically represent the Cherubim” every bit as much as do the clergy and the altar servers.

As representatives of the Cherubim, we should strive to participate in the services in such a way as to fully express our devotion to God, and to add to the beauty of the service out of love for our fellow believers, and out of concern that we encourage each other to worship and love God more deeply.

We should not be concerned with our outward actions only. It is certainly true that one can behave in an outwardly pious way, and yet remain a hypocrite. However, it is also true that one cannot be outwardly impious while still remaining inwardly pious. We should strive for both, because both are needed. Inward piety adds a depth of meaning to our outward acts, and outward actions can promote heartfelt worship.

The culture we live in constantly tells us how much more we deserve, and that we

should measure the worth of everything in terms of what we “get out of it”. This is now the way most people look at Church. People come to Church, and expect that the Church should meet their needs. People expect the service to both entertain and uplift them. In contrast, Orthodox services are (or at least can and should be) beautiful even in the eyes of unbelievers, but they are clearly hard. They are often long, and standing for a long time is not something most people expect from Church. Granted, they might stand for an hour in line to get on one ride at Disneyland, or for an entire concert, or for a lengthy conversation with someone in the Church parking lot, but they expect comfort and ease in Church. But the services of the Church are not a service for the people who attend them – they are a service to God. The Greek word for worship, “Leitourgia” (from whence we derive the word “Liturgy”) means “work” or “service,” and thus service (as a servant serves his master) to God. It’s not all about me. It’s about God, and it’s about those around us.

St. Paul teaches us that in the context of the worship of the Church, all things should “be done decently and in order” (1st Corinthians 14:40). This is not because the Church delights in heaping meaningless rules upon us, but because our love for each other requires that we all help each other as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Every Orthodox custom and practice has a purpose: some guard us from causing others to stumble, some guard us from stumbling ourselves, and some simply provide tangible ways for us to express our love for God. Our willingness to submit to the Tradition and discipline of the Church is an essential part of being an Orthodox Christian. We know from reading the Scriptures that we should be humble, and obedient... but we often bristle when it comes to actually exercising those virtues. We must understand that this unwillingness to submit to the Church or to each other is a sign of that we have more work to do, if indeed we wish to follow Him who submitted to spitting, scourging, thorns, the nails, the spear, and to death upon the Cross.

## **Entering the Church**

When we enter into a Church, we should first of all make the sign of the Cross three times with bows from the waist (not full prostrations). The prayers that one says while doing this vary a little. Some simply say the prayer of the Publican, “God be merciful to me a sinner” with each bow. A more elaborate form is given in the prayer book:

“Thou hast created me, O Lord, have mercy!”

“God be merciful to me a sinner!”

“Countless times have I sinned, O Lord, forgive me!”

The prayer book further admonishes us:

“Then, having bowed to the right and the left (to the people on both sides of the Church), one stands in one’s place and listens to the psalms and prayers read in church....” (*Prayer Book*, 4th ed., Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996, p. 388).

It is also customary to venerate the icons and light candles after entering the Church, and to venerate them again before leaving.

One should not linger near the entrance of the Church, because this makes it difficult for others to enter. Also, visitors often feel a certain sense of discomfort when they enter an unfamiliar Church, and so tend to stay close to the back of the Church or near the walls. Those who are regular parishioners (who do not need to sit along the walls due to some infirmity) should be mindful of this, and move forward and to the center of the Church to make room.

### **Arriving Late or Leaving Early**

We should be at Church on time for all services, but this is especially important for the Divine Liturgy, and all the more so if we are planning on receiving communion. For the Vigil, one should try to be on time, but if work or other duties make that impossible, it is better to attend some of the Vigil rather than none of it. Likewise, if such duties make it impossible to stay until the end of the Vigil, there are several points at which one may leave that are least disruptive:

1. Immediately after vespers, but before the Six Psalms of Matins.
2. After the Six Psalms.
3. After the kissing of the Gospel and / or the anointing with blessed oil.
4. After the end of Matins, as the first hour is beginning.

For the liturgy, we should make every effort to stay until the end – and if we have communed, leaving early is particularly to be avoided except in cases of extreme necessity.

Wandering in and out of the Church during the Divine Services is inappropriate. If we must leave due to an emergency, we should do so with as little commotion as possible. It is a good idea to make sure your children have gone to the bathroom before entering the church. When reentering the Church we should be careful to

not do so during the more important moments of the service, such as during the entrances, the Epistle and Gospel readings, the Creed, the Anaphora, the Lord's Prayer or the Communion Prayer. At such times it is best to stay in the Narthex, and wait for a less solemn moment to return to our place.

### **Attire in Church**

We should come to Church with the profound sense that we are coming before the King of the Universe. If we were going to visit an earthly ruler, we would want to dress as best as we were able as a simple matter of respect for the person we would be seeing, and we should have at least as much reverence for God and His holy temple.

Clothing should also be modest – which means one's clothes should actually cover one adequately. A good rule of thumb is that we should be attired such that we would be able to make full prostrations without embarrassing ourselves or those around us. We should not wear clothes that attract undue attention to ourselves, either because they are flashy, gaudy, or because they are immodest (see 1st Timothy 2:9-10).

According to the teachings of St. Paul the Apostle, women should cover their heads in Church, and men should not (see 1st Corinthians 11).

It should be noted, however, that it is not up to individuals in the parish to enforce a dress code. People should concern themselves with their own behavior, and that of their families. In situations in which something needs to be said, the priest, the warden, or the senior sister will be the one to do so.





### **Standing in Church**

The normal posture of Orthodox worship is to stand during the services. Pews are found in many Churches in America, but this is not the traditional practice of the Orthodox Church. There are traditionally benches along the sides of the walls of the Church for people to sit who need to – particularly the elderly, and the infirm. Those who are able to should graciously give up their seats when they see an elderly or infirm person who needs to sit, or a visitor who is unaccustomed to standing. There are certain times when one should definitely be standing, unless they are unable to do so: as a rule, whenever the Royal Doors are opened, during the Six Psalms at Matins (at which time one should be particularly still), during the Gospel reading, the Anaphora (when the Eucharist is consecrated), and during the “Our Father”. At these same solemn points of the service, we should refrain from lighting candles, venerating the icons, or moving about unnecessarily.

If one must sit, one should not cross one's legs while doing so. Particularly for those Orthodox from “the old country”, this is considered to be very disrespectful. Whistling in the Church, at any time, is considered to be extremely disrespectful to Russians.

During the service, we should not fold our arms, lean against the walls, or stick our hands in our pockets. These postures signify a casual attitude that is not conducive to right worship.

On Sundays we do not kneel or make prostrations, except when making prostrations before the Cross on those occasions when the Cross is brought out for veneration.

### **When Receiving Holy Communion**

Communing is a matter that should be treated with the utmost seriousness, and should neither be taken lightly by carelessly communing, or by avoiding confession and communion for prolonged periods of time, unless this is due to a penance (in which case regular confession should continue).

Proper preparation for communion requires all of the following elements: recent confession, the blessing of the priest to commune, keeping the fast, praying the pre-communion prayers from the Prayer Book, and abstaining entirely from food and drink from the midnight prior to communion.

One should wipe off lipstick or lip balm before communing or venerating an icon, the Gospel, or the cross. These can damage icons or wooden crosses, and can be difficult to clean off from metallic items.

Parents should ensure that the faces (and noses) of their smaller children have been wiped prior to their approaching the chalice.

Do not make the sign of the Cross when approaching the chalice, because it has happened that this has resulted in knocking the chalice, and spilling the Holy Mysteries, which is a very serious matter. Instead, one should approach the Chalice with ones arms crossed (with ones right hand on ones left shoulder, and ones left arm covering ones right arm, and touching ones right shoulder).

After communing, one should wipe ones mouth with the communion cloth, and kiss the Holy Chalice, but refrain from kissing the priest's hand or the icons, until after one has had the zapifka (the hot water and wine, and prosphora that is on the table off to side of the Church).

### **Children in Church**

The Scriptures teach us that children are a blessing from the Lord. A parish without children is a parish that is dying. We want to encourage families with children to come to our parish, and we also want to help parents with their children. Even the

best behaved children are going to make some noise, and we have to accept this part of having a growing parish. If one sees parents having difficulty keeping their children under control, one should offer help, rather than just criticism. Parents with children should also do their part to maintain an atmosphere conducive to prayer in the Church, and to teach their children how to behave reverently in the house of God.

### **Prosphora**

Prosphora is holy bread and should be treated as such. It should be eaten only when one has fasted from midnight, and one should be careful not to drop crumbs on the floor. With children, this presents some difficulty, because we don't want to deprive children of the blessing of this bread, but children also tend to be less careful with it. Parents should teach their children to handle prosphora appropriately, and smaller children should be given smaller portions. Very small children should probably just be fed a small amount by their parents.

### **Kissing the Cross**

At the end of the Liturgy, when approaching the Cross, one should first make the sign of the Cross, then kiss the Cross, and finally the priest's hand.

### **Post-Communion Prayers**

After the kissing of the Cross, the post communion prayers are read. These prayers can also be said privately, but those who have communed are encouraged to stay for these prayers of thanksgiving for the blessing of having been allowed to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. In the Gospels, Christ healed ten lepers, but only one came back to thank him. We should ensure that we either stay for the reading of these prayers immediately after the liturgy, or say them privately as soon as otherwise possible, lest we be guilty of ingratitude to God.

### **Trapeza and Fellowship After the Liturgy**

Having a communal meal after the liturgy is an ancient practice that goes back to the time of the Apostles, and is mentioned in several places in the New Testament, where it is spoken of as the "agape meal" or "love feast". This meal and the fellowship that goes with it, is an extension of the liturgy, and so all who can stay should do so. We live in a part of the country in which we encounter few Orthodox Christians outside of the context of Church, and so we need to endeavor to strengthen our relationships with one another. The parish is an extended family, and we should work to make our ties with each other strong, so that we may encourage one another to live for Christ, in a world in which that is increasingly difficult to do.

### **Final Thoughts**



There was a time when it would have been completely unnecessary to have spelled out most if not all of what is written here, because people living in an Orthodox culture lived and breathed their faith, and even those who were not particularly pious were surrounded by Orthodox piety to such an extent that even they knew how conduct themselves properly in Church. We, however, live in a culture which emphasizes rights, comfort, instant gratification, and self-expression to an extent which is inimical to the Orthodox ethos of sacrifice, struggle, asceticism, and self-denial. In addition to this, we are experiencing that “hardness of hearts,” that “coldness” that the scriptures and the fathers predicted would be the hallmarks of the latter days.

If we understood what it means that when we go to church we are in the presence of the very God who created the world and everything in it, and of Jesus Christ who took on and still wears our human flesh so he can be with us and save us, and the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets and who preserves and leads the Church in all Truth, we would take care to be standing whenever the curtain between us and the high place is opened—let alone when the Gospel is being read, we are being censured, or the mysteries are brought out to us. It would literally feel wrong to sit at these times. We would be sure that we and our families arrive at Church on time (we are the bride of Christ, and should hurry to be in the presence of our bridegroom), and in good order.

If we loved God and one another correctly, we would nonetheless need instruction on the proper way to behave in church (just as children who love their parents must be taught how to behave), but none of these matters would be controversial. One is not rude, careless, or self-centered in the presence of those one loves. Therefore, one is not rude, careless, or self-centered in Church. The reason we believe that the disorder evident in many of our churches is evidence of lack of love, rather than a simple lack of instruction, is the response of many people to instruction. Instead of giving thanks for the instruction and humbly obeying the guidelines passed down to us from the scriptures and the fathers, some become “offended,” justifying themselves and attacking the character of whomever “dared” to attempt to instruct them. We also fear that this lack of love is becoming a problem in Church because it is a problem in many of our homes, and that we cannot practice self-discipline in Church because we do not practice it anywhere else. Our children refuse to obey instructions we give them in Church because we let them get away with refusing to obey instructions we give them at home. Church services are something “to get through” just like daily prayers are at home (if we even do them at home).

Finally, a note on the issue of “authenticity” or of “being genuine.” Some of us have been seduced into endorsing the fallacious notion that if we do anything without really feeling like doing it, we are being hypocrites. The consequences of subscription to this belief are soul-destroying. It should be obvious that whatever it is within us that doesn’t feel like praying, or dressing modestly, or standing attentively, or refraining from chatting during the services, is not something to which we should submit. If we are truly cooperating with God in working out our own salvation, we will act rightly regardless of any caprice of our emotions. The problem is not that feelings are bad, but that they’re unreliable. If we experience joy or peace in the presence of God, that is clearly a good thing. If we don’t, we don’t—but that is no justification for disobedience. We don’t always feel love for our spouses or our children, but we must nonetheless choose to act on the fact of our love for them, regardless of our feelings. Feelings are the caboose of the train – they come along at the end, but they only follow when we act on what we believe, and do what we know we should.

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Source: [Orthodox Christian Information Center](#).

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