

# *Traditions & Etiquette of the Orthodox Church*

## *Saint Spyridon Hellenic Orthodox Church Palos Heights, Illinois*

*For any questions, please feel free to contact the parish priest.*

Modern culture is rather casual in its approach to worship and sacred space. In our Orthodox Church we adhere to long-standing traditions that express the reverence which is due to God, to each other, and to ourselves. Respect for God and His house translates to respect for all of His creation. The following guidelines are custom and traditions of etiquette that we need to be aware of as Orthodox faithful. Please read the following information prayerfully and with an understanding for the Church's obligation and pastoral duty to shepherd with love and compassion for all the faithful.

### **Entering the Church**

- **Arrive on Time**

The time to arrive at church is before the service starts. If you arrive after the Divine Liturgy has begun, try to enter the church quietly and at the appropriate moment. We must not enter the church when the Epistle or Gospel is being read, when a procession is taking place, or at any time that the priest is facing the congregation. Please always follow the directions of the Parish Council members in this matter.

- **Lighting Candles**

The lighting of the candle is an expression of gratitude and prayer as we enter the church. When we light our candle we want to make sure it is not during the reading of the Epistle or Gospel, or during the processions.

- **Venerating Icons**

When we enter the church it is traditional to venerate the icons. When venerating (kissing) an icon, do the sign of the cross and kiss the hand or feet of the person depicted. And remember, blot out your lipstick before kissing an icon.

### **While in Church**

- **Standing vs. Sitting**

After we quietly find a pew, we join the congregation in attentive worship. The traditional posture for prayer and worship in the Orthodox Church has been to stand. There are occasions during the services when we are instructed to kneel. Otherwise, it is never wrong to stand in church. Sitting at times as suggested in the Divine Liturgy book or because of physical limitations is allowed. If we are sitting in church, we do not cross our legs. We sit attentively, keeping those feet on the floor and ready to stand at attention.

- **Talking during Church**

Talking with others is disrespectful toward God and toward others who are trying to pray. Talk to God while in church through your prayers, hymns, and thanksgiving, and to your friends in the community hall afterwards. Most importantly, silence or turn off your cell phones.

- To Cross or Not to Cross

To cross oneself is according to personal piety and it is not an issue of dogma. But there are times when it is specifically proper to cross yourself such as when the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, or the Theotokos is heard. It is also proper to cross when entering or exiting the church, or when passing in front of the Holy Altar, or before venerating an icon or holy objects. While the priest is censuring the congregation it is proper to simply bow our head. We also bow our head when the priest blesses the congregation or when he says: “Let us bow our heads to the Lord”.

- Snacks for Children

Parents often bring snacks along for the children to eat during church. And for young children, (0-2 years old), this is fine. By the time children are 3-4 years old, they should be able to make it through the Liturgy without eating, and by the time they reach seven (the age of their first confession), they should begin fasting on Sunday morning for Communion. For those children who get snacks, clean up as best you can, and please do not feed them while in the line for Holy Communion, since they need to come for Communion without food in their mouths.

- In & Out

Once we are in the church, we plan to stay there until the service is over. Taking restless little ones out is a different matter. If a child is disruptive, take him/her quickly and quietly out of the church and to the cry room, just long enough to settle them down. Then return to the church as soon as the child is ready.

- Handling the Holy Bread (Antidoron)

After taking Holy Communion and at the end of the liturgy, it is traditional to eat a piece of holy bread or Antidoro—the bread that was left over after Holy Communion was prepared. While Antidoro is not Holy Communion, it is blessed bread and as such, should be eaten carefully so that crumbs don’t fall all over the place. After taking Communion or kissing the cross at the end of the Divine Liturgy, take one piece of Antidoro (you don’t need four or five pieces), place it in your right hand, and when you return to your seat or get to a place where you can stop for a moment; eat the bread trying not to drop crumbs. If you want to give a piece to someone else, go ahead and take an extra piece—don’t break yours in half (it produces too many crumbs). And monitor your children as they take the Antidoro and teach them to eat it respectfully.

- Kiss (Don’t Shake ) the Priest’s or Bishop’s Hand

Did you know that the proper way to greet a priest or bishop is to ask his blessing and kiss his right hand? How do you do this? Approach the priest or bishop with your right hand over your left hand and say “Father (or “Master” in the case of the bishop), bless”. [He will make the sign of the cross, and place his right hand over yours]. 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 you kiss their hands, you show respect for their office—they are the ones who “bless and sanctify” you and who offer the holy gifts on your behalf. So next time you greet your priest or bishop, don’t shake their hand, ask for his blessing.

- Leaving Before 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 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 the day’s agenda. We deprive ourselves of blessings by not being still and participating in God’s holiness. Stay in church and thank God for His precious gifts.

### **Appropriate Attire**

- **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. Unfortunately, this is not 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 “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. If you’re going somewhere 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, you don’t go to be seen by everyone else—you go to meet and worship God.

- **Here are some specific guidelines:**

#### **Women**

Dresses should be modest. No tank tops or dresses with only straps at the shoulders, no short skirts (mini skirts), and no skintight dresses. Dresses should have backs and not be cut low in the front. Women should never wear pants in church unless there are some physical limitations and have received the permission of the parish priest. Women who wear lipstick to church should blot their lips well before venerating an icon, receiving Communion, or kissing the cross or the priest’s hand.

#### **Men**

Men should also dress modestly. While a suit and tie is not mandatory, shirts should have collars and be buttoned close to the collar. Slacks should be cleaned and pressed. Jeans (of any color) are too casual for church, especially ones with patches or holes. Shorts are not appropriate church wear. Earrings, piercings and visible tattoos are not appropriate.

### **A Final Thought**

Much of the church etiquette is based on common sense  
and showing respect for God and others.

Always remember that you are in church to worship  
with fear of God, faith and love. Amen.