

Dear Friends and Members of the Parish,

Having been frequently asked questions about Church customs and appropriate behavior during services, I was pleased to come across this article by Fr. Sergei Sveshnikov which I think will very help to all.

+Fr. John

On Church Etiquette

“...all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40)

The Orthodox Church is the sacramental Body of Christ, but at the same time, it is a group of people who are united not only spiritually, but also socially. This is why the Orthodox Church has developed its own rules of etiquette. Unfortunately, many of us grew up in an unchurched society and came into the Church at an age when our parents and grandparents were no longer telling us how to behave ourselves, as they did when we were younger. This is why it is up to us to observe and learn the rules and customs of the Church and of our parish.

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...” (Isa. 61:10)

It is quite often that we hear misunderstanding of the reasons why the Church has rules about our garments: “What difference does it make to God what I wear?” Indeed, there is no difference to God what we wear, because He looks at our hearts, not our clothes. But to us it really matters what we have on and how we are dressed. When getting ready for a ball, for example, a lady puts on a beautiful gown. It would be strange to attend an official reception dressed in a swim suit. When going to do chores, we would not wear a tuxedo. So, it is not surprising that some clothes are fitting to wear to church and some are not.

In the Russian Church, it is customary that men wear trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, sweater, jacket, etc. It is unacceptable to come to church in shorts, exercise pants, or a t-shirt. Women should wear a skirt and blouse, or a dress, and cover their heads. Displays of sexiness are out of place in church. God’s temple is a place for prayer, not for attracting everyone’s attention. The center of attention in church should be God, not our person.

Of course, this does not mean that we cannot wear anything beautiful. Quite the opposite, in church, everything should be beautiful—architecture, art, vestments. And our garments need to be clean, neat, and beautiful. But we must try to develop our taste, and learn to distinguish between what is beautiful and what is flashy.

Should you wear perfume or eau de Cologne? - not in church. Remember that some people are allergic to perfumes and can suffer an allergic reaction or asthma. Excessive makeup is also out of place in church. To soil an icon or cross with lipstick is disrespectful.

“I will enter into thy house; I will worship toward thy holy temple...” (Ps. 5:7)

Upon entering the church it is customary to thrice make the sign of the cross with prayer- one could simply say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We must remember that a church is the house of God, thus we must pause, pray, or just ponder the holiness we are about to enter.

You should come to church for the beginning of the service and stay until the end. If there are objective reasons why you must be late or leave early, then enter or exit the church very quietly, in order not to distract others.

It is customary to greet the people who are already in church with a simple bow. In general, any conversations, with the exception of the most necessary ones, are out of place in church. We can learn the latest news from the lives of our friends and share our own news after the service and outside the church.

When you enter the church do not stay in the entry way, but proceed to the main part of the church (the sanctuary). A crowd in the narthex makes it difficult for other people to come into the church.

"Arise! Lord, bless..."

In the Russian Orthodox Church, we stand during services due to a feeling of deep reverence before God's temple, service, and Sacraments. In the Orthodox mindset, one stands before God, not sits before Him. The service is not a time for rest and meditation, but for co-laboring with God in the task of our salvation. An outward symbol of our readiness to work is standing on our feet, not sitting. However, if someone has difficulty standing due to illness or age, he or she can sit during the service.

If you are late to the service, but you still want to venerate icons, light a candle, etc., you must remember not to walk around the church when the royal doors are open or, during the singing of the Eucharistic Canon - the time when the bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of our Savior. The Canon begins after the singing of the Creed ("I believe in one God the Father Almighty...") and ends with the singing of the *Axion estin* ("It is truly right to bless Thee, O Theotokos..."). Therefore, from the singing of the Creed until the end of the *Axion estin* walking about the church is not allowed. Also do not walk about the church and light candles when the Gospel is being read or during the sermon, when all Christians should be listening.

"Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps. 34:11)

Children should participate in church services from the youngest age, in other words, from birth. But just as with all other things, parents must gradually teach the child to follow the rules of behavior in church. Of course, one cannot expect a three-year-old to stand perfectly still for two hours straight, but one also should not allow the toddler to run around the sanctuary with toys. Parents must gently but firmly guide the child's energy into the proper channel. They must teach their children to observe church etiquette from the youngest age, and not get discouraged if this process takes some time.

Those who come to church without children should be glad that there are children in God's temple, and pray for those children and for themselves.

When giving a prosphoron and pieces of antidoron (blessed bread) to the children, make sure that crumbs do not fall on the floor. Often, the best way to avoid crumbs is for the adult to break off a piece of blessed bread and place it directly into the child's mouth.

“Receive the Body of Christ, taste the Fountain of Immortality”

Much has been written about Communion, but it seems fitting to point out a few things. In the Russian Church Communion is offered to Orthodox Christians who have gone to confession and received a blessing to partake of Communion. Confessions are primarily heard after the evening service, but also before the beginning of the Liturgy. During the Liturgy we do not have confessions. Please make every effort to come to confession after the evening service. Of course it is not possible for everyone for various reasons- age, transportation, parishioners from out of town- but, if several confessions are heard before service, it causes the service to start late, and extra work for the readers and the choir. If you are waiting for confession, please send notice to the priest of your intent. While in the altar, the priest has no way of knowing if someone is waiting for confession.

If you are receiving Communion and want to venerate the holy icons, please do so during the 'concert'. When the Royal Doors open, everyone should be still and attentive. When approaching Communion, cross your arms on your chest and do not make the sign of the cross, lest you accidentally bump the Chalice. After Communion, one should immediately proceed to the table where the acolytes have prepared wine mixed with water and pieces of prosphora. One should carefully eat a piece of prosphoron and drink some wine mixed with water immediately after Communion in order that no small piece of the Holy Gifts remains in the mouth. Veneration of holy icons should be done before, but not after Communion.

“Let us depart in peace...”

After the service has ended, you must first piously exit the church, and only then share the latest news with your friends. Even though the service has ended, the temple remains the temple, and we must remember this. Once outside or in the parish dining hall, you may talk and socialize (of course, as long as you are not visiting a monastery, where very different rules apply).

***“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well”
(Matt. 6:33)***

Despite the importance of some rules for Church etiquette, we should remember that the meaning of Christian life is not in following rules, but in a closer union with God. Rules merely serve a supportive, utilitarian role.