

On Church Etiquette and its Meaning

Deacon Colin Bower

For the inquirer who first enters an Orthodox Church, much of what he sees comes across as foreign and exotic. Despite this feeling of otherness, however, what makes him truly feel out of place or uncomfortable is seeing what Orthodox Christians are doing during the services. We cross ourselves, bow, venerate icons, stand for long periods of time, and other peculiarities that clearly delineate between a newcomer and an experienced churchgoer. What must be understood is that our actions during Church, strange as they may seem, flow from our faith and have been handed down to us by our forefathers. These actions are full of meaning, and it is through engaging in the physical aspects of Orthodox worship that the faithful pray and direct their minds from that which is worldly to that which is Divine.

The Sign of the Cross

The Sign of the Cross is the most common movement in Orthodox worship. It is an act in which the believer, holding his right thumb, pointer and middle finger together, with the ring and little finger touching the palm, touches his head, stomach, right then left shoulders. This act is in itself a prayer, during which we say the Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner) and a confession of the saving work of Christ, who accomplished our salvation through the cross. The three fingers represent the Trinity, who is One God in Three Persons, and the two fingers touching the palm symbolizes the Incarnation of Christ, who took upon Himself our nature and was fully God and Man. The faithful cross themselves before entering the Church, in front of icons, and throughout the service. Knowing when to cross oneself is important, as it can aid the believer in engaging with the Services in a manner that is beneficial for the soul.

Before entering the Church, we cross ourselves three times with bows from the waist, saying the following prayers: "Thou hast created me, Oh God, have mercy on me. Oh God, cleanse me a sinner. Many are my sins against Thee Oh Lord, forgive me." Having humbled ourselves before the Lord, we can enter the Church and lift our hearts to Christ. During the services we cross ourselves at the end of litanies, exclamations from the priest, before and after the Epistle and Gospel readings, and before and after receiving Holy Communion. We do not cross ourselves during the reading of the Kathisma (Psalter readings), instead crossing ourselves at the Stasis (Glory/Now, Alleluia [x3]) with bows at the waist.

We should not be careless with the sign of the cross. The Holy Fathers say that the demons rejoice when we cross ourselves with haste or without reverence, for in doing so we confess our lack of love for Christ. We should be careful when we cross ourselves, that by doing so with great reverence we might please the Lord through our prayer. The cross is not magic, we should not expect the Lord to act on our behalf if we cross ourselves, however it can be said that the Lord draws near to those who draw near to Him, what better way to do so than through reverently crossing ourselves!

Bows

Bows are often accompanied by the sign of the cross, but this is not always the case. There are also different types of bows: bowing the head, from the waist, and all the way to the ground. We bow because we are in the presence of the King of All, and it is fitting to fall before Him as a sign of humility. Archimandrite Zachariah (Zacharou) describes this as the path of the Lord, who out of extreme humility worked out our salvation and raised our humanity from death to life. When we bow we recognize our place as sinners before God, an act which invokes repentance.

Bowing the head and bows from the waist are used at all services, but bows to the ground, also known as prostrations, are only done on weekdays and Saturday at the Divine Liturgy. There are exceptions to this, namely the feasts of the Lord and the 40 days after Pascha. It is also customary to prostrate more often during Great Lent and other lesser fasts. We do not prostrate on Sundays, because each Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection and thus prostrations would be inappropriate.

During the services there are appointed times in which the faithful bow without crossing themselves. This is when the priest is blessing, or the deacon is censuring. The faithful bow here because they are receiving a blessing from the clergy, who are the ministers of Christ. The faithful also bow when the deacon proclaims "let us bow our heads to the Lord," as this is a liturgical command. The faithful cross and bow at the waist during the Trisagion Hymn, and while venerating icons.¹

Venerating Icons

At the front of the Church there are icons of the Savior, the temple, the Mother of God and for the feast of the day. It is customary for the faithful, upon entering the Church, to venerate the icons and say a prayer. This is done by crossing and bowing at the waist twice, kissing the icon, then crossing and bowing again. It is also customary to light a candle in front of certain icons, as the candle is representative of our prayers. This act is done to show honor to the person depicted in the icon. This is not, as some might claim, worship of the icon itself. The rejection of icon veneration is a heresy condemned by the Church.

Veneration of icons is good, but there are times during which it is inappropriate. We should venerate the icons when we arrive and leave, *but this is only appropriate so long as we arrive before and leave after the service*. We should not be moving around, especially in the front of the Church, during the Divine Services. The only exception to this is during vigil, when we venerate the festal icon and are anointed with oil by the priest.

Moving in Church

¹ For more detailed instructions on the sign of the cross and bows in Church, see the Appendix on page 388 of the Jordanville Prayerbook, *How One Should Pray in Church*

One of the more disorienting aspects of Orthodox worship is the absence of pews. Such a peculiarity to our Church allows for freedom in all of the liturgical acts mentioned above, as well as an ability to move more freely throughout the temple. This is essential to our worship, but also provides a temptation to move throughout the temple at whim. As mentioned above, there is a time and place for when we should move about in Church, and understanding this will allow for a more spiritually beneficial encounter with the Lord.

At St. Vladimir's, we have a schema using the three lampadas over the Royal Doors. If only the center light is on, it is appropriate to move from where you are standing if the need arises. It is important that we use discernment here; not every perceived need is actually a need, and in fact many of the reasons we want to move are not needed at all. Discernment is critical in this, we must practice discipline and only move from where we are standing if we have a good reason to do so.

When all three lights are on, it is an indication that we are in a particularly solemn moment of the service, and movement is entirely inappropriate. We should be focusing our entire selves on the service, body and soul, that our hearts may be softened by the service and we may receive Divine Grace. One of the greatest acts we can accomplish while at the services is attentively allowing our hearts to be lifted up, "that we may receive the King of All who cometh invisibly in triumph upon the ranks of angels."²

Outside of Saint Vladimir's, how can we determine when it is appropriate to move in Church? The following instances are when we should NOT move during the Liturgy: The Great Ectenia, the entrances, the Epistle and Gospel readings, the Anaphora (starting at the Creed, and ending at "It is Truly Meet"), during the Our Father, and during Holy Communion. At the evening services we should not move during the Great Ectenia, the entrances, the Prophecy and Gospel readings, during the six psalms, and at the Great Doxology. The only instances in which moving is *expected* is when the priest (or deacon) is censuring the icons in the Church, during which the faithful should move to the center that they may pass, and when the festal icon is venerated at the evening services.

Conclusion

What should we do if we see someone behaving in a manner contradictory to these guidelines? We should first, and most importantly, pray for them as we would pray for ourselves. We should then remember that we are not to judge, lest we be judged (Mat. 7:1-4), and unless we have been given the blessing of the rector to address such behavior, it is likely not our place to do so. It is the role of the parish Warden, who is the direct assistant to the Rector,³ to "see to it that good order be observed in the church during divine services;"⁴ and as such it is his responsibility to address inappropriate behaviour in the Church. We should be attentive to our own selves, and our children if we have any, lest we fall into the sin of pride and become blind to our own faults. Learn to pray in Church, then the actions of others will not be a concern to you.

² Cherubic Hymn

³ For more on this, see the by-laws of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia

⁴ Normal Parish by-laws of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia