

Orthodoxy 101:

Proper Etiquette & Worship Practices

Over the years, I've received numerous search engine hits for things like *Orthodoxy for dummies* or *how to make an Orthodox prostration*. It made me realize that a brief list of basic practices for new people could be helpful.

The first and best place to learn the externals of Orthodox worship is in your local parish. While some local customs will vary, the externals as a whole are part of our living tradition and will be fairly consistent (especially in monasteries).

In the 4th century, St. Basil the Great wrote about Christians standing during worship, facing east in prayer, making the sign of the cross, worship on Sunday, and numerous other practices that he states came from the apostles through oral tradition. Even the hymn "O Gladsome Light" was quite ancient by his time.

These practices are not superstitious or arbitrary rules. Each one carries with it theological significance. Additionally, we as human beings are composed of both a body and a soul, and we unite those things when we worship in Orthodoxy. By following these practices, we mystically enter into the life of the Church, joining all the Christians who are still alive in Christ. We are unified in theology, practice, and spirit with our brothers and sisters from all ages.

This article will focus on worship in the church. This is not meant to be an all-encompassing list of external piety, but simply a guide to help beginners feel a little less awkward when embarking down the Orthodox Road. With each practice, I attempt to describe what is done and also why we do it.

Orthodox Worship in The Public Church

Standing during worship



One of the most difficult practices for those who are new is standing for worship. Except during the homily, a Christian should remain standing

during the entire service – if he has the strength and health to do so. Many people have health complications or lack the strength to stand the entire time, so seating is provided. But we make an effort to stand for as much of the service as is possible.

Many churches have seats or pews, others have none. Visitors should wear comfortable standing shoes so they are prepared in case there is not adequate seating.

There are certain parts of the service where everyone who is physically capable should stand, including: the Gospel reading, the Small and Great entrances, when being censed, and during Communion.

Why do we stand during worship? Standing helps clear the mind, while sitting can cause one to grow too comfortable and begin to daydream. Also, standing indicates active engagement in worship. Sitting indicates passive observation. During prayer, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God. The posture of standing allows us to make a very small sacrifice (our temporary comfort) in order to be respectful of Christ's presence and to show our love for him.

When a world leader such as the President of the United States enters a room, what do people do? They stand out of respect. What should we do when the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Creator of the entire cosmos enters into our space? We should stand in reverence of His presence, even if we cannot feel it.

Facing east in prayer and worship

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Gen. 2:8)

Look toward the east, O Jerusalem, and see the joy that is coming to you from God! (Baruch 4:36)

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. (Matt. 24:27)

Since the time of the Apostles, Christians have faced eastward in prayer. Just as the rising of the sun in the east dispels the darkness of night, so the return of the Son of God will dispel the darkness of our present age. In the direction in which we orient our bodies, we proclaim our faith in Christ's second coming and look for Eden, our paradisaical home in the east. Therefore, in most parishes, Orthodox Christians will face east during worship. In the home, the icon corner is also normally located on an eastern wall.

Making the sign of the cross

We Christians wear out our foreheads with the sign of the cross – Tertullian (ca. AD 200)



The Orthodox Christian makes the sign of the cross by placing his thumb to his first two fingers to symbolize the Trinity, and the remaining two fingers rest against his palm to symbolize the two natures of Christ (divine and human). The right hand holds this form as it is moved from the **forehead**, to the **navel**, to the **right shoulder**, and then to the **left shoulder**. This traces the cross on the entire upper body.

It is an ancient symbol that has cured people of diseases, driven out demons, and worked all sorts of miracles. It's not magical, but when done with faith, it's powerful.

It is customary to make the sign of the cross during prayer and also before icons and relics, but not before people such as priests and bishops when they are blessing the faithful. You also don't need to cross yourself before receiving a blessing from a bishop or priest.

Reverencing icons

Icons and relics should be treated as if the saint is actually present, because they do manifest the presence of the saint, especially for one who approaches with faith.

When moving forward to venerate an icon or relic, the Christian should make the sign of the cross twice, bowing from the waist after each Cross. Then he or she kisses the icon (or relic), and then make one more sign of the cross with a bow from the waist. At certain times (such as during the Exaltation of the Cross), the faithful will make a prostration instead of a simple bow from the waist – even on Sundays.

Where to kiss?

Icons are typically kissed on the hand or foot of the person portrayed, but never on the face or in any other way that is disrespectful. The person in the icon should be looked upon as our master and not our buddy because, at this point, they are glorified and we are still in our sins. We need their help, they do not need our petitions.

When entering a Church, it is an excellent practice to venerate the icons that have been placed in the Church for such reverence. This practice helps the worshiper to enter into a spiritual mindset. Normally, the icons on the iconostas (the panel separating the altar from the rest of the church) are not venerated. There are various reasons, but the most practical is that these are often expensive, hand-painted icons that will sustain heavy damage if frequently venerated.

If the icon is not covered in a glass case/frame, refrain from venerating it while wearing lip products (lip stick, chapstick, etc.). The oils and chemicals in such products will deteriorate the finish on icons. Most lip products are petroleum based, which is like kryptonite on the finish of an icon. But even the oils in the natural ones can do harm.

Also, if you come in late, do not go up to venerate the icons if there is a procession happening, a Gospel or Epistle reading, or at any point when the priest is facing the people.

For more on why we venerate icons, [check out this article](#).

Making prostrations

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! (Psalm 95:6, Masoretic text)

The prostration is typically performed all at once, so that the Christian bows to the ground and then immediately rises. The worshiper gently falls to his hands and knees, places his forehead on the ground above his hands, and then rises back to his feet.

Prostrations are infrequently practiced in parishes because the most common service that people attend is the Divine Liturgy on Sundays. That day is a weekly celebration of the resurrection and our adoption as children of God, so prostrations are uncommon.

When and how to do a prostration during weekday services is best discovered simply by following the example of those around you. The best rule I can give anyone is what I learned in a monastery: don't do anything that makes you stick out. It's easy to become proud, which is why we have the Publican and not the Pharisee as our model (Lk. 18:9-14).

Kneeling at will, beating the chest, shouting, and other extravagant outward displays are fine in a jungle but are not acceptable in church. I write that somewhat jokingly, but some of the Church Fathers have had to write against such unruly behavior, and coming from a Charismatic background, I've seen some crazy things.

Lighting a candle

Lighting a candle and placing it before an icon of our Lord or a saint's icon is a long-standing tradition. We light the candle and ask our Lord (or a saint) for help, for prayers, etc. The lit candle represents our prayers, and the light also represents the prayers of the Church dispelling the darkness of this world with God's light. The small fee we pay for the candle shows our seriousness in making the prayer (and it often helps a little to support the local church).

Dressing properly (clergy and laity)

When visiting an Orthodox church, here are the most conservative dress standards:

Laity:

- For men: dress pants or khakis with a collared shirt.
- For women: a modest top with a skirt or a dress, preferably at least knee length. Maybe a head covering. See below for more details.
- For both: No colognes, perfumes, or flashy jewelry. The purpose of gathering to worship is just that: worship, not attracting attention to ourselves.

Clergy:

- For readers and subdeacons: wear your cassock at your home parish. When visiting other parishes, you would typically only wear your cassock if asked to serve. When I was a reader and subdeacon, I left my cassock in the car when visiting another church. If asked to serve, I would retrieve it from the car.
- For deacons and priests: wear your cassock for all church services, at home and when visiting other places.
- For all clergy: inform the parish priest of your visit ahead of time, especially if you walk in wearing a cassock. This is in keeping with the church canons.

The above rules are based on my experience in OCA, Carpatho-Russian, and ROCOR parishes and monasteries. Some parishes will vary depending on their culture and geographical location. What I detailed above is conservative, and it is best to err on the conservative side when visiting an unfamiliar church. Most parishes will accept anyone who is at least making an attempt to dress as respectfully as they know how, particularly if the person is visiting. Services outside of Sunday morning liturgy tend to be more casual because some people come there straight from work (or on their way to work).

If visiting a monastery, check their website for information on how to dress. They tend to be very traditional.

A note on head coverings: they are used in many parishes and nearly all monasteries, but some have no rules about them. Head coverings have been used by Christian women since the first century. It is even addressed in the Bible (1 Cor. 11). It is not a symbol of bondage or oppression, but rather a symbol to the spiritual world that this woman is covered (protected) by the authority of her Husband Christ (if she is unmarried) or by her husband in the flesh who is under Christ. St. Paul wrote very mysteriously about this matter but seemed to stress that it had spiritual significance beyond what our eyes can see.

Greeting a priest/bishop

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (1 Cor. 4:15)

Generally, priests are addressed as “Father” and bishops as “Master,” for the latter are Christ’s presence among us, as the apostles taught (see the [letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch](#)).

When greeting a priest, the Christian crosses his right hand over his left hand, saying, “Father, bless.” The priest will say something like, “The Lord blesses,” while making the sign of the cross over your hands. The priest then places his right hand on your hands. You then bow to kiss the right hand of the priest. Traditionally, this is how clergy and laity greet one another on a daily basis.

St. John Chrysostom stated that if a Christian were to meet an angel and a priest walking together, that he should greet the priest first and receive his blessing, for he is a conduit of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even if the priest is not very saintly, the grace of the Lord is still upon him due to his office held in the Body of Christ.

The same etiquette is followed with bishops except one says, “Master bless” when crossing their hands. If a room has several priests and a bishop, the Christian typically refrains from asking the priests for a blessing and only asks the bishop.

Normally, the priest’s left hand is not kissed. We kiss the right hand of the priest for it is through the priest’s right hand that the Holy Spirit comes upon the Eucharistic elements and transforms them into the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy.

Kissing the chalice

On a similar note, many Orthodox Christians will kiss the chalice after receiving communion. Before performing this pious custom, the Christian should wait until his or her lips have been wiped clean with the communion cloth. Doing so ensures our Lord’s precious Body and Blood are not accidentally smeared on the chalice.

The order should go something like this: the person receives communion, he has his mouth wiped, the priest lifts the chalice, and the person kisses the bottom portion of it.

In some places, there is a tradition to kiss the priest’s hand that is holding the chalice and the top of the chalice. This is discouraged in most places because it increases the risk that the chalice could be knocked a little too hard and its contents spilled. If it is the practice in your parish (or one that you visit) to venerate the priest’s hand and the chalice, do so carefully.

A bit off topic, but if you ever feel unbalanced or weak when approaching the chalice, put your hand on the shoulder or arm of one of the altar servers to help you keep your balance. I once saw a lady grab onto the priest when she lost her balance and it spilled the chalice everywhere, causing a huge mess.

Addressing monks/novices

Monks are addressed as “Father.” Not nearly all of them are priests, but all are still addressed with respect. Ordinary monks are not ordained to the priesthood and will not give a priestly

blessing (though you certainly may ask for their prayers). Usually, hieromonks (priest-monks) wear pectoral crosses and that is how they can be distinguished from the other monks. You can ask a hieromonk for a blessing just as you would any other priest.

Novices are addressed as “Brother.” If you’re uncertain, simply ask. Most of them were new once, especially here in America, so they don’t mind.

I have not visited a women’s monastery, but the rules I believe are pretty much the same: female monastics are addressed as either “Mother” or “Sister” depending on their rank.

Worshipping on Sunday

The Orthodox, like the disciples of Christ, worship on the day of the Lord’s resurrection. As the Book of Acts indicates, the disciples went to the Jewish Temple on the Sabbath (Saturday), but they had their own Christian worship on Sundays. Some fringe groups claim that Saturday is the true day Christians should worship in church, but the founders of these groups are both theologically and historically ignorant.

Every Sunday is a miniature Pascha (Easter) in which the Body and Blood of Christ are received by the faithful for the remission of sins and life eternal as we celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord and look forward to our own. Our Lord died on the sixth day (Friday), rested in the tomb on the seventh day (Saturday), and arose on the eighth day (Sunday).

Sunday in Greek is Κυριακή, which means “Lord’s Day.” Symbolically, it is a never-ending day, therefore it is fitting to worship on the eighth day. When we worship, we enter into a time outside of time, proclaiming our life and resurrection in the Lord. That is why we worship on what should properly be thought of as the eighth day; the day that is the culmination of all days, the fulfillment of all ages.

Feel free to leave any extra tips in the comments below. I know I’ve left out quite a few things, but hopefully this will address a majority of questions.

Lastly, this can all sound overwhelming or like a bunch of silly rules. If you’re new, try not to sweat it. You’ll pick up on these things as you go along. The rules are not arbitrary, but they’re also not the equivalent of a New Testament Law of Moses. No one is going to stone you if you miss something. Most people probably won’t even notice. More than anything, focus on prayer and drawing close to God. Eventually, these things will become a part of you and how you worship.