

MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC

Approximately seventy-five percent of the service involve singing. Traditionally, Orthodox worshippers are led by deacons, who use only cymbals and the triangle. It has been fairly said that the liturgy is one continuous song. Relatively little changes from Sunday to Sunday; for the most part, the same prayers and hymns appear in the same places, and soon you know it by heart and feel as though you are in the presence of God.

SAINTS AND THE VIRGIN ST. MARY



Many people wrongly assume that we Orthodox Christians worship the saints and worship Saint Mary. We wouldn't dare! Only God is worthy of worship. We however honor and admire the saints for their heavenly accomplishments, as God is now and will forever honor them in heaven. Likewise, we honor Saint Mary because God chose her, among

all the women that would ever be born, to be His mother and from whom he would take flesh. The Bible teaches us that "all generations" will call St. Mary "blessed." We know from tradition that her body was taken up to heaven because God deemed it too holy to stay on earth, since she carried the Lord.

THE ICONOSTASIS

Every Orthodox Church will have an iconostasis before its altar. "Iconostasis" means "icon-stand", and it can be as simple as a large image of the Virgin Mary on the right and a corresponding image of the Christ Child on the left. The Iconostasis shields the Altar from view, except when the central door is open. When closed, it represents the divide created when Adam and Eve sinned against God. When open, it symbolizes the reconciliation between God and Man when Christ died for us on the Cross.



No one is allowed inside the Altar unless appointed by the priest to enter. Altar service – priests and deacons – is restricted to males. Females are invited to participate in every other aspect of church worship. Their contribution has been honored equally with men's since the days of the martyrs; you cannot observe an Orthodox Altar without seeing St. Mary and other holy women. In the Orthodox Church, women do everything else men do: paint icons, teach classes, and serve on the church council.

WHERE DOES AN AMERICAN FIT IN?

There are roughly 6 million Orthodox Christians in North America and 250 million in the rest of the world, making Orthodoxy the second-largest Christian communion.

Orthodox Christians throughout the world hold unanimously to the fundamental Christian doctrines taught by the Apostles and handed down by their successors, the bishops, throughout the centuries. One could attribute this unity to historical accident, but we attribute it to the Holy Spirit.

Orthodoxy seems startlingly different at first, but as the weeks go by it gets to be less so. It will begin to feel more and more like home, and will gradually draw you into your true home, the Kingdom of God. I hope that your first visit to an Orthodox church will be enjoyable, and that it won't be your last.

May the Lord grant you peace and happiness and bless you all the days of your life.

What You Need to Know When Attending an Orthodox Church



But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; In fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple. (Psalm 5: 6-8)

Orthodox worship is different! Some of these differences are apparent from the first moment you walk into a church, while others become noticeable only over time. Here is some information that may help you feel more at home in Orthodox worship.

WHAT IS ALL THIS I SEE?

When you walk into an Orthodox Church you'll notice three levels of ground. The further to the back, the higher the level of ground. The first level is where most of the pews are, all facing a wooden structure with icons placed in it (referred to as the "iconostasis"). That is where the general congregation stands (those other than deacons and priests). At the second level of the Church you will notice pews to the left and to the right that face each other. That is where the deacons (individuals ordained to serve God and the church) stand. They might be wearing regular clothes when you come in, but about later they and the priests dress in white garments used only for liturgical services. The third level is behind the iconostasis where you will notice three entrances: one to the left, middle, and the right. The entrance on the left is referred to as the "men's communion room" because generally, during services, only men are supposed to enter there. The entrance on the right is called the "women's communion room" because generally, during services, only women are permitted to be there (although sometimes deacons will walk through there to move from the second and third level). In the center you will find the altar upon which, during the Divine Liturgy, bread and wine are placed to later become the Body and Blood of Christ.

COVERING YOUR HAIR

Orthodox women cover their hair when in prayer. For women, their hair is one of their greatest treasures. Covering your hair symbolizes that God is far more of a treasure than the hair on their heads. Paul states in his letter to the Corinthians to "Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering." (1 Cor 11:13-15)

STAND UP DURING THE SERVICE

In the Orthodox tradition, the faithful stand up for nearly the entire service. In any case, if you find the amount of standing too challenging, you are welcome to be seated. No one minds or probably even notices. Long-term standing gets easier with practice.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

To say that we make the sign of the cross frequently would be an understatement. We sign ourselves whenever the Trinity is invoked, whenever we venerate the cross or an icon, and on many other occasions in the course of the Divine Liturgy. But people are not expected to do everything the same way. Some people cross themselves three times in a row. We cross with our right hands from left to right.



PROSTRATION

We do sometimes prostrate. To make a prostration we kneel, place our hands on the floor, and touch our foreheads down between our hands. Not everyone prostrates. Some kneel, some stand with hands bowed; in a pew they might slide forward and sit crouched over.

GETTING ON WITH A HOLY KISS

During the Divine Liturgy the congregation is told to give a "holy kiss" to each other. Put your hands together like you are about to clap, but don't clap! Then spread them apart about an inch. You'll see people showing you their hands. You are supposed to clasp the right hand of the people next to you (with both of your hands) as a showing of Christian love for one another.



BLESSED BREAD AND CONSECRATED BREAD

Only Orthodox Christians may take communion, but anyone may have some of the blessed bread. During the Eucharistic prayer, the Bread is consecrated to be the Body of Christ, and the chalice of wine



is consecrated as His Blood. Visitors are sometimes offended that they are not allowed to receive communion. Orthodox Christians believe that receiving communion is broader than me-and-Jesus; it acknowledges faith in historic Orthodox doctrine. There is nothing exclusive about this; everyone is invited to make this commitment to the Orthodox Church. The Eucharist is the Church's treasure and is reserved solely for those who have united themselves with the Church. This seemingly restrictive practice has been around since the time the Church began during the era of the Apostles. We believe it is truly the Body and Blood of Christ. We ourselves do not receive communion unless we are making regular confession of our sins to God in the presence of a priest and are at peace with other communicants. We fast from all food and drink – yes, even a morning cup of coffee – from midnight the night before communion.

WHERE'S THE GENERAL CONFSSION?

Orthodox Christians believe that we have no general sins; they are all quite specific. There is no complete confession-prayer in the Liturgy. Orthodox Christians are encouraged to make regular, private confessions to their priest.

PRIESTS

The role of the Orthodox priest is much more of a spiritual guide than in other denominations. He is not called by his first name alone, but referred to as "Father [first name]." Moreover, you might notice that people kiss the hand of the priests. That is because those hands touch the Body and Blood of Christ every Divine Liturgy.