

The Church

The Church has two meanings. First and foremost it is the gathering of the Body of Christ, the people of God. It is through the Mysteries of Baptism and Holy Communion that we become members of the Church and are united to Christ. This mystery of the Body of Christ is revealed at every Divine Liturgy. As St John Chrysostom explaining the words of the Apostle Paul *"For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread."* (1 Cor. 10:17) says "What is the bread that we commune of? The Body of Christ. What do the faithful who commune of it become? The Body of Christ. Not many bodies, but one body." Going to Church and participating in the Mysteries is not a private matter that we do for our own spiritual benefit. When we partake of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ we are united not only to God but to each other, making us all members of the Body of Christ.

The Church is also the temple in which the People of God gather to worship and glorify God and to offer the bloodless sacrifice of the Divine Eucharist. As St Germanos Patriarch of Constantinople tells us, "The Church is the temple of God, a holy place, a house of prayer, the congregation of the people of God, the Body and name of Christ, the Bride of Christ which invites all people to repentance and prayer...The Church is heaven on earth in which the heavenly God dwells and walks...The Church is a divine house. It is the place where the mystical sacrifice of Christ was offered (in other words, the frightful Golgotha)...and the holy cave of Bethlehem. It is the all-holy tomb of the Lord and the soul-nourishing and life-giving Table of the Mystical Supper."

The Lord's Day

Sunday is called the Lord's Day because it is the day on which Christ rose from the dead and should be dedicated to his service; to attending Church, participating in the Mysteries (Sacraments), prayer, hearing sermons, reading spiritual books and performing works of mercy. This is why it is vital that Orthodox Christians attend and participate conscientiously, and not

mechanically, in the Divine Liturgy and other services of the Church. It is inconceivable for an Orthodox Christian to say, "I am a good man, I do no one any harm, but I cannot go to Church." This is a betrayal of our salvation. When asked, "How do we know that a soul is ill?" St John Chrysostom answered, "When a man does not want to attend Church." We would do well to follow the example of the first Christians who "continued daily with one accord in the Temple." (Acts 2:46) and attend weekday services as well. Saturday evening Vespers and Sunday morning Matins (Orthros) are an important preparation for the Divine Liturgy. The hymns and readings at these services contain all the teachings of the Church as well as of the feasts and saints lives that we celebrate. As the contemporary Elder Fr Epiphanius Theodoropoulos exhorts us, "Go to Church early. We do Orthros for the faithful and not for the chairs!"



Orthodox Christians should attend Church every Sunday and on Feast days unless they are prevented by sickness or live at too great a

distance. A king once observed on a stormy winter morning that the church was almost empty, whereas in the evening, though snow was heavily falling, the theatre was crowded. "Alas," he exclaimed, "people are ready enough to make sacrifices for pleasure, but for God they will make none." St Paul speaks very strongly of the importance of Christians preserving the true faith and gathering together in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another, in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching." (10:23-25)

The Council of Elvira in 306 AD decreed that "if anyone remains three Sundays in a city without going to Church, he shall be deprived of communion for a time." (Canon 21) the 80th Canon of the 6th Ecumenical Council in Trullo states that they will be excommunicated. We must understand, however, that we don't go to Church because we are compelled to but because of our love for God and the spiritual need of our soul. God has no need of us. We are the ones who are in desperate need of His saving Grace that we receive in the Mysteries. The purpose of these canons is not to punish, but to bring us to repentance by making us aware that we have separated ourselves from God by not coming to Church.

When we are preparing to go to Church and especially the Divine Liturgy we must first make peace with those who have anything against us and those whom we have offended. As Jesus Christ Himself said, "...first be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift." Besides inward spiritual preparation, we should also prepare outwardly. We should come to Church dressed tidily and modestly. St John Chrysostom spoke severely to women who came to the Liturgy to attract attention and show off their clothes. "O conceited one! Is this finery befitting a contrite sinner, who comes to entreat pardon? Such garments are more suitable for the ball room than the Church." If one were visiting a monastery

church, men would have to wear long trousers and women skirts. Is there really any difference between the sanctity of a monastery church and a parish church?

It is an ancient custom of the Church to attend the Divine Liturgy without having eaten, even if one is not receiving Holy Communion. The Apostles “prayed with fasting” (Acts 14:22) Fasting is not an end in itself but a means of self-denial to bring the flesh into subjection to the soul. Children and the infirm are not expected to keep this fast.

The Ninth Apostolic canon forbids us to arrive late for services or to leave before the Dismissal, as this is “a cause of confusion to the Church.” Moreover one should remain inside the church and not come in and out during the service or stand outside unless there is no room in the church to stand inside. It is totally disrespectful to stand outside smoking during the Liturgy or to leave the church when the priest is going to give the sermon. St John the Almsgiver was Patriarch of Alexandria in the 7th century. In order to put a stop to the bad habit of his congregation who would gather outside during the services did the following: One Sunday, instead of vesting and going into the church to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, he went and sat outside with the people to their astonishment. “Where the sheep are, there the shepherd must be,” he said, “While you stay here, I shall do the same; if you go in, I will go too.” After this no one was seen outside the church during the Liturgy.

Vocal music is an integral part of every service in the Orthodox Church. The Church, knowing the labours of those who sing, prays for them at every Liturgy. It is therefore vitally important that the choir members come to Church on time, so that they may respond to the priest’s first petition and that “all things may be done decently and in order.” (1 Cor. 14:40) When the singers straggle in one by one, and start discussing matters not related to the order of the services, the choir can be only a source of confusion and disruption in the worship of God. Blessed Augustine said of sacred music, “ How many tears

have I shed, when hymns and odes were sung to Thee, O my God! What emotions were aroused in me, when the church re-echoed with sweet melodies! Each note fell upon my ear like soothing balm, carrying conviction of Thy truth to my heart, and kindling within me the ardour of devotion.” Sometimes singers have the attitude that they are something separate from the rest of the worshippers in the church, that they are not in church to pray but to accompany the prayers of others. Some feel that the choir loft is something separate from the rest of the church and that they can behave differently from others as long as they fulfill their responsibility to sing the responses. The members of the choir should have even greater reverence and devotion than the other worshippers precisely because of their direct assistance in the celebration of the Mysteries.

Compiled by Bridget Julia Hayes

Orthodox Church of St Nicholas of Japan
Holy Archbishopric of Johannesburg and Pretoria
156 Fulham Road
Brixton
Johannesburg

Divine Services

Saturday Great Vespers: 18h30

Sunday Matins: 08h30

Sunday Divine Liturgy: 09h45

A midweek Liturgy is held on most Wednesdays at 06h00 except during Lent, or if there happens to be a feast day during the week, the midweek service will be held on that day.

Parish Priest: Fr Athanasius Akunda
Tel: 0843500517

Coming to Church on the Lord’s Day

