

# How We Behave in Church

A Guide for Orthodox  
Christians

Orthodox Parish of St Nicholas of  
Japan  
Holy Archbishopric of Johannesburg and  
Pretoria

This little booklet is intended as a guide to devotion and Church piety for Orthodox Christians to help them participate more fully in the worship of the Church. It is in worship and particularly the Divine Liturgy that the Church truly becomes what she is, the Body of Christ. Orthodox piety therefore is liturgical in character. Worship is not something passive, but

requires the participation of the whole person, mind, body and will. In Orthodoxy there are some liturgical customs that vary from place to place and there are others that reflect what we are doing as we gather together as the Church. Unfortunately in many places this liturgical piety has disappeared as the Christians have become more secularized, especially those living in a Western society. Western society has lost nearly all sense of awe and reverence towards both things and people. The way we behave and worship in Church goes against these norms of society. It should be a witness to our belief in a God who is holy and awesome and before whom we stand with reverence, respect and adoration.

Many Orthodox resist any changes in the way they behave in Church because “I have been Orthodox all my life,” or “We don’t do it that way,” or “My mother never taught me that.” Unfortunately there are many long established *bad* customs, misunderstandings and ways of behaving in all of us. Once we accept, however that our behaviour in Church should reflect what it means to be the Church and to be in the Church then we can learn “new” behaviour. Like any other pattern of behaviour that has to be learned, liturgical piety, to start with, requires a conscious effort until it becomes second nature. At first we may feel a bit awkward, but the more we do it the more it becomes part of us. As this happens we can forget about the form and concentrate on the meanings of our actions.

### The Church

In order to understand what Church piety is we need to first of all understand what the Church is. 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 80<sup>th</sup> Canon of the 6<sup>th</sup> 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. Women, in particular should not wear revealing garments. 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." The very act of gathering together *on time* is a liturgical action. When a person arrives late (unless by some necessity) it shows that he or she does not understand that the worship of the Church is an act of the *whole* Church, clergy and laity together. It is not a concert performed by the priest, choir and servers. 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Entering the Temple of the Lord

In the first Great Litany of the Divine Liturgy we pray for those enter into the holy house of the Lord with "faith, reverence and the fear of God." It is with this attitude that we are to enter into the Temple of the Lord. The first thing we do when we enter the Church is make the sign of the Precious and Life-giving Cross three times, each time making a bow from the waist/metanoia/poklon and saying:

1. Thou hast created me, O Lord, have mercy!
2. God be merciful to me, a sinner!
3. Countless times have I sinned, O Lord, forgive me!

(In the Russian practice it is customary to first make the Sign of the Cross then bow, in the Greek practice one first bows then makes



the sign of the Cross.)

After entering the temple we venerate the Holy Ikons, the Holy Cross, Relics or the Holy Gospel by making two metanoias and the Sign of the Cross, kissing the ikon and then making a third metanoia with the Sign of the Cross. We do not worship or pray to the holy ikons. The honour that we show to the ikon goes to the person represented in the ikon and shows our love towards that person. Just as ordinary pictures remind us of people whom we love, so the ikons remind us of Holy Persons and the events that brought about our salvation. We honour ikons in much the same way as we respect the portraits of those whom we love and esteem. When we venerate the Cross we are worshipping the Lord who died thereon. When we kiss the Gospel book we venerate to Word of God contained therein. We venerate the ikons of the saints who are our role models for the Christian life, for “God is glorified in his saints” (2 Thess. 1:10) We do not do not ask help from the ikons, but from God, through the intercessions of His saints. When venerating ikons we kiss the feet of the Saviour, the hand of the Theotokos and other saints. Of the Crucifix, always kiss the feet or the lower bar. When venerating holy objects or receiving Holy Communion women ought to remove all lipstick before coming into church.

It is customary after venerating the ikons to place a lighted candle before it as a sign of the sincerity of our prayer. The lighting of a candle is also an offering to God and a sign of joy. Blessed Jerome remarks that “throughout all the churches of the East, when the Gospel is about to be read, tapers are lighted though it be broad daylight, not to scatter the darkness, but as a sign of joy; that under the symbol of bodily light, that Light may be shown forth of which we read in the Psalter, ‘Thy word, O Lord, is a lantern to my feet and a light unto my paths.’”

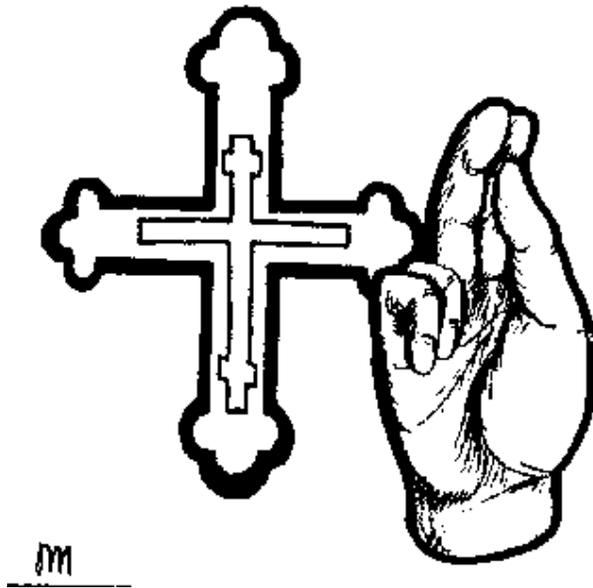
The veneration of ikons and lighting of candles should not be done at the most solemn moments of the liturgy:

1. The first blessing: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”
2. At the Little Entrance at the singing of the Beatitudes when the Gospel Book is brought out.
3. The Trisagion (“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.
4. The reading of the Gospel.

5. The Cherubic Hymn.
6. The Great Entrance (When the bread and wine are carried in procession)
7. The Eucharistic prayer or Anaphora (From the dialogue beginning with “The doors...” to the exclamation, “The mercies of our great God and Saviour...” which concludes the prayer of consecration.
8. The singing of the “Our Father.”
9. The Communion of the clergy and the people.

### **The Sign of the Cross**

We make the sign of the Cross with our right hand by joining the thumb, index and middle fingers and bending the other two fingers down to the palm. We touch the three joined fingers to the forehead, showing that we love God with our mind and dedicate all our thoughts to Him. We then touch the breast, showing that we offer to God all our desires and feelings. Finally we touch our shoulders: first the right and then the left, showing that all our physical activity belongs to Him. The sign of the Cross is a confession of the Orthodox faith. The three joined fingers symbolize our faith in the Holy Trinity, the One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The two lowered fingers are a confession of perfect divine and perfect human natures of our Lord Jesus Christ.



### **Rules for bows (metanoias/poklons) and the Sign of the Cross:**

#### **I. The Sign of the Cross without Bows**

1. At the middle of the Six Psalms of Matins, at Alleluia, thrice.
2. At the beginning of the Creed.

3. At the dismissal: “May Christ our true God...”
4. At the beginning of a reading from Holy Scripture: Gospel, Epistle or Parable (at Vespers, Royal Hours.)

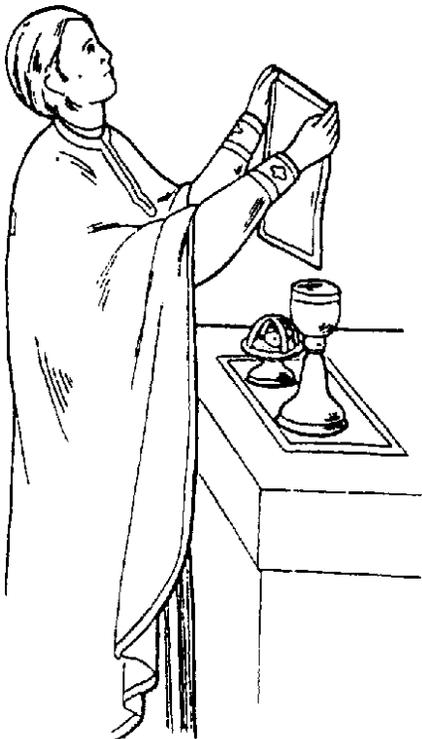
## **II. The Sign of the Cross with metanoias/poklons**

1. When entering or leaving the Church, thrice.
2. “Blessed is the Kingdom...” thrice.
3. At each petition of the Litanies
4. At each exclamation of the priest offering up glory to the Holy Trinity.
5. At the exclamations: “Take, eat”; “Drink of it, all of you”; “Thine Own of Thine Own” and “The Holy things are for the holy.”
6. At the words: “More honourable than the Cherubim...”
7. At each of the words: “Let us worship,” “Worship,” “We fall down.”
8. During the words: “Alleluia,” “Holy God,” “Come let us worship” and after the exclamation “Glory to thee, O Christ God,” before the dismissal, thrice

## **III. The Sign of the Cross with prostrations**

To make a prostration we kneel, place our hands on the floor, touch our foreheads between our hands and get up again. These are made:

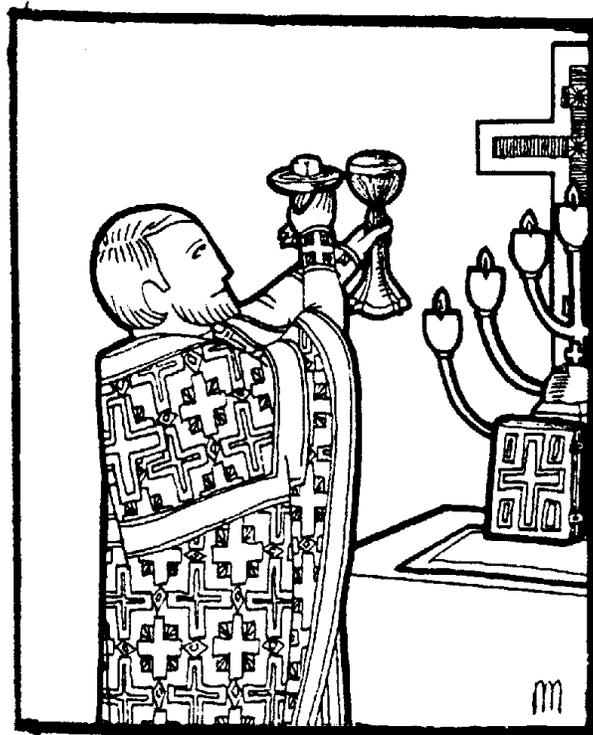
1. During fasts, on entering and leaving the church, thrice
2. During fasts, after each refrain of the Hymn to the Theotokos (Magnificat), “we magnify you.”
3. At the beginning of the hymn: “It is meet and right to worship the Father...”
4. After, “We praise Thee...”
5. After “It is truly meet” or its substitute megalynarion.
6. At the exclamation: “And vouchsafe us, O Master...” before the Lord’s prayer.
7. At the bringing forth of the Holy Gifts, at the words: “With the fear of God,” and the second time, at the words: “Always, now and ever.”
8. During Great Lent, at Great Compline at the chanting of “O most holy Lady”, at each verse; at the chanting of “Rejoice O Virgin Theotokos. At the end of Great Lenten Vespers, three prostrations.
9. During fasts at the prayer, “O Lord and Master of my life.”



10. During fasts, at the concluding chanting: “Remember us, O Lord when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom.”

#### **IV. Bows from the waist without the sign of the Cross**

1. At the words “Peace be unto all.”
2. “The blessing of the Lord be upon you...”
3. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father...”
4. “And may the mercies of our great God...”
5. At the words of the deacon: “And unto the ages of ages” (after “For holy art Thou, O our God.”)



#### **V. The sign of the Cross is not made:**

1. During psalms.
2. Generally while chanting
3. During the Litanies by the choir that chants the responses. The making of the sign of the Cross and bows should be done after chanting is finished and not during the closing words.

In Church, whenever we are blessed with the Cross, the Gospel book, an icon or the chalice we make the sign of the Cross and bow the head. But when we are blessed with candles, the priest or bishop's hand(s) or when we are censed we do not make the sign of the Cross but just bow our heads. However during Bright Week when the priest censes with the Cross in his hand, then all make the sign of the Cross and answer: “Indeed He is risen!” Thus we distinguish between reverence toward holy things and toward persons, even though they be of priestly rank.

The sign of the Cross is one our most important spiritual weapons in our war against temptations, because through the Holy Cross of Christ the Devil was defeated. St Cyril of Jerusalem says: “Let us make the sign of the Cross boldly and courageously. When the demons see it, they are reminded of the Crucified; they take flight; they hide



themselves and leave us.” We don’t just make the sign of the Cross in Church during the services. It should be our constant companion. St Cyril continues, “Let us not be ashamed to confess the Crucified; let us boldly make the sign of the Cross on the forehead and on everything; on the bread which we eat; on the cups from which we drink; let us make it at our going out and at our coming in; when we lie down to sleep, and when we rise, when we journey and when we rest. It is a great safeguard, given to the poor without a price, to the weak without labour. For this is the Grace of God; a token for the faithful and a terror for evil spirits.”

It is important that we make the sign of the Cross reverently. It is easy for something we do repeatedly to become mechanical and precisely for this reason we should pay special attention when making the sign of the Honourable Cross of our Lord. To those who make the sign of the Cross carelessly, simply waving their hand about as if playing the guitar St John Chrysostom warns, “The demons rejoice at this frantic waving.” When however we make the sign of the Cross correctly and with devotion and faith it dispels the demons, drives away sinful passions attracts Divine Grace and gives us strength to do good and struggle against evil.

### **Kneeling and Prostrations**

Kneeling is an ancient practice of the Orthodox Church and is not the same as in Western confessions. We do not kneel, heads upright but remain in the prostration position, on our knees with our heads touching the floor. This is done when the priest (or deacon) proclaims, “Again and again on bended knee let us pray to the Lord,” during the kneeling prayers of Pentecost.

### **Kneeling and prostrations are not allowed:**

1. On Sundays because it is the day of the Resurrection of our Lord
2. From the Nativity of Christ through Theophany
3. From Pascha until Pentecost Sunday
4. On the day of the Transfiguration

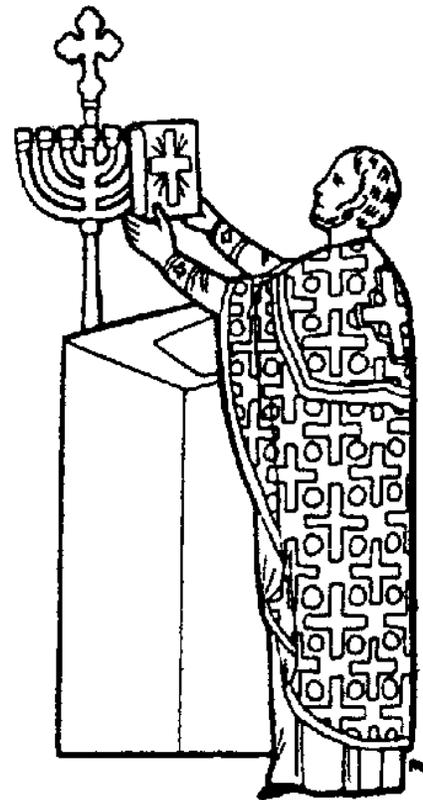
5. On the day of the Exultation of the Holy Cross (except three prostrations before the Cross)
6. During the day in which Holy Communion has been received.

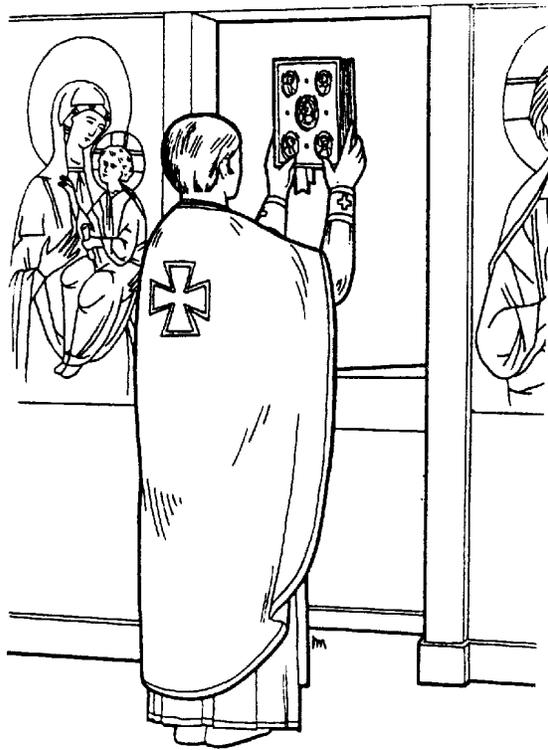
We make no prostrations from the Entry at the Vespers of a feast, until “Vouchsafe, O Lord” at the Vespers on the day of the feast itself.

Kneeling is a sign of sorrow and repentance and we should not be sorrowful on days commemorating the events, which brought about our salvation

### Standing in Church

The proper posture of worship for Orthodox Christians is standing. For this reason Orthodox Churches traditionally do not have pews or chairs. The Lord said, “When you shall stand to pray, forgive if you have anything against anyone.” (Mark 11:25) The First Ecumenical Council held in 325 AD directed Christians that “standing let them offer prayer to God” (20<sup>th</sup> Canon.) It is also testified to by the Apostolic Constitutions, the Christian writers and Fathers of the early Church and the canons of the Ecumenical councils (1:20; 6:90.) We are even instructed in the Liturgy, “Let us stand aright! Let us stand in fear! Let us attend, that we may offer the Holy Oblation in peace.” Standing is a sign of reverence and honour towards God. Just as we stand to honour an important person or victor in some contest so much more do we stand to honour God Who took on our human nature, suffered and died for our sakes and triumphed over the Devil. Until recently only the elderly and infirm were allowed to sit at certain parts of the services. Since the habit of sitting during the divine services has developed and has become a deeply rooted custom in some places, the Church has allowed sitting at certain parts of the Liturgy.





1. We stand at the blessing at the beginning of the Liturgy, "Blessed is the Kingdom..." We may sit for the Great Litany which follows, but stand at the priest's exclamation at the conclusion of the Litany and remain standing until after the reading of the Gospel. In some parishes it is customary to sit during the reading of the Epistle.

2. At the Litany after the Gospel: "let us say with all our soul..." we sit until the Cherubic Hymn ("Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim...")

3. At the Litany after the Cherubic Hymn: "Let us complete our prayer unto the Lord..." we sit until the exclamation at its conclusion at which time we remain standing until the Litany before the "Our Father."

4. At the Litany before the "Our Father": "Having commemorated all the saints..." we sit. We stand for the Lord's prayer and remain standing until the end of the Liturgy.

5. We sit for the sermon and announcements.

It is forbidden for anyone, including the elderly and infirm, to sit at the following parts of the Liturgy:

1. When the priest censes.
2. At the Little Entrance with the Gospel Book.
3. At the Great Entrance with the Gifts.

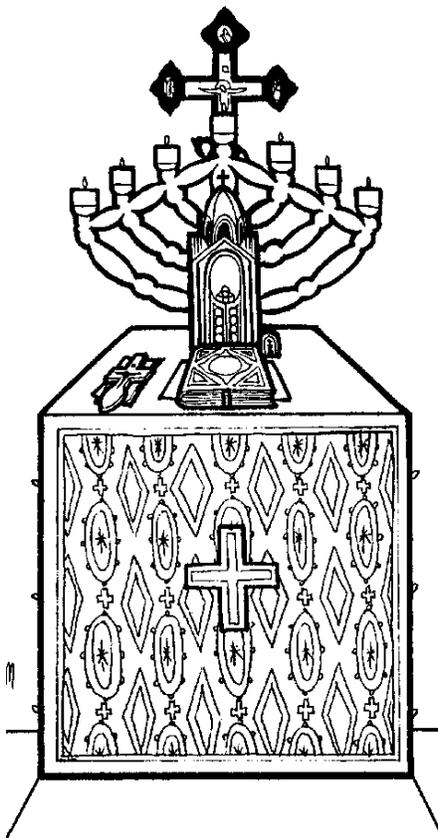


4. When the Creed is sung and until the end of “We praise Thee.”
5. The consecration of the Holy Gifts.
6. At the “Our Father.”
7. From the exclamation, “With the fear of God and with faith and love draw near,” to the very end of the Liturgy.
8. When the priest blesses us.

### Behaviour in Church

When in church we should at all times show respect for the holiness of the place. It is an offence to God to whisper and laugh or to chew gum. We face the *front* of the Church and don't look around or watch the choir. The service is not a concert. When standing we do not fold our arms or place them behind our back and when seated we do not cross our legs. It is great to see family and friends when we come to church, but we should wait until after the service is finished to talk to them. When we converse with someone we give him or her our undivided attention and don't think about anyone else. In the Divine Services we should be giving our undivided attention to God alone. In the Cherubic Hymn we are called upon to “lay aside all earthly cares,

that we may receive the King of all” We should fix our thoughts on God and forget about everything else. Saint Ambrose of Milan (4<sup>th</sup> cent) says of those who misbehave in church that they come into church with small sins and go away with great ones. We must watch our outward behaviour and our language for even the ground around the Church is consecrated. This also applies to the church hall and classrooms.



Laypersons have no right to enter the sanctuary without necessity. If there is some need then it must be done in fear of God and great reverence and only with the blessing of the priest. If someone must pass behind the Holy Altar, he must sign himself with the Cross and bow his head because this is the most sacred part of the Temple. Servers who assist the priest must act with all fear and reverence, because they are

serving at the Throne of the Lord. The must not speak loudly or walk about in the Sanctuary, nor must they step too closely to the Holy Altar or the Royal Doors. Laymen may not pass between the altar and the ikonostasis. It is forbidden for laymen to touch the Holy Altar or sacred vessels. No one except the Bishop, Priest or Deacon may pass through the Royal Doors for through them the King of Glory, Christ Himself enters. When we pass in front of the Royal Doors while we are venerating the ikons or moving about the church we must make the sign of the Cross and make a metanoia.

In Church we must not be ashamed of our Faith, and expressing it in outward signs and rites of the Church. He who is ashamed of the Faith is not a true Christian. As Christ said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 10:32-33)

The Liturgy is by no means the work of the priest or choir alone. The word “leitourgia” literally means, “work of the people” – the whole people of God. As baptized Orthodox Christians we are all members of the Royal Priesthood and no Liturgy can take place without the presence and participation of the faithful. The services are a dialogue between the priest and the people and all the prayers (except the prayer for the priest said during the Cherubic hymn) are in plural: “In peace let *us* pray to the Lord...” etc... Therefore the faithful should join in the singing, and especially of the Creed and the Our Father.

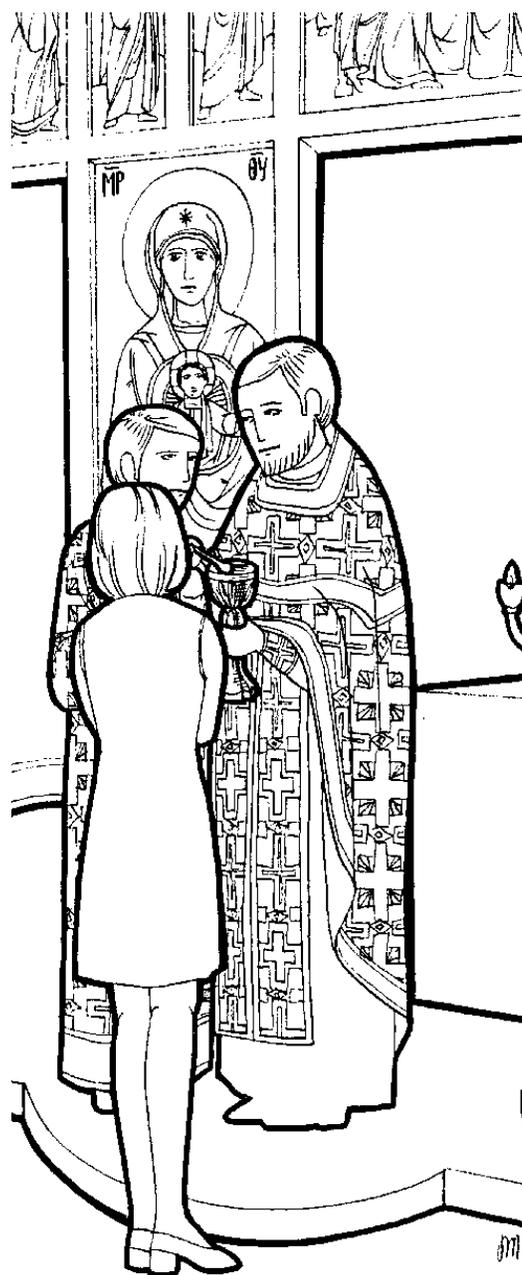
### **Receiving Holy Communion**

In the Mystery of Holy Communion we are united to our Lord Jesus Christ and have Him dwelling within us. It is the spiritual nourishment that helps us continue our ascetic struggle to attain the likeness of God and perfection. Without frequent communion progress in the spiritual life is impossible. The early Christians communed daily thus gaining strength to endure martyrdom. The saints too, communed frequently and we too should follow their example as we are all called to become saints. The frequency with which we receive Holy Communion should be determined by our spiritual father.

In order to partake of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ we need to prepare both our body and soul. We must cleanse our soul through confession to our spiritual father or confessor. It is only in the Mystery of Repentance and Confession that we receive forgiveness of our sins. The more regularly we go to confession the more we will progress in the spiritual life. God is Fire who illumines those who love Him and burns those who separate themselves from Him. This is why it is vital that we receive Communion in a worthy manner. For those who love God and partake in a worthy manner, Communion purifies, illumines and deifies them. Those, however, who partake unworthily without repentance and confession will suffer spiritual and even physical illness and death. As St Paul the Apostle warns, "...let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many of you are weak and sick among you and many sleep [die]. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged."(1Cor. 11:28-31)

Persons who consciously and purposefully (out of lack of concern, discipline or out of laziness etc...) arrive late for the Divine Liturgy should *not* receive Holy Communion. As the late Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh put it, "You are either taking part in the making of the service or you are not, and if you are not, you will not take part in its culmination."

Before approaching the Holy Chalice we must make peace with all men and give up all attachment to earthly things. The evening before we should examine consciences, our thoughts, our actions and ask God to forgive us for all the ways in which we



have offended Him. We must also read the prayers in Preparation for Holy Communion. Our body must be prepared for Holy Communion by fasting from at least midnight. Many pious Christians fast from the evening meal of the previous day or from the time of their confession if it was the evening before. Devout Christians will even abstain from food and practice self-denial for three days or more before partaking of the Mysteries. Before Communion everyone should say the communion prayer:

**I believe, O Lord and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first. I believe also that this is truly Thine own most pure Body and that this is truly Thine own precious Blood. Therefore I pray Thee, have mercy upon me and forgive my transgressions, both voluntary and involuntary, of word and of deed, committed in knowledge or in ignorance. And make me worthy to partake of the most pure Mysteries, for the remission of sins and unto life everlasting. Amen.**



**Of thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God, accept me today as a communicant. For I will not speak of Thy Mysteries to Thine enemies, neither like Judas will**

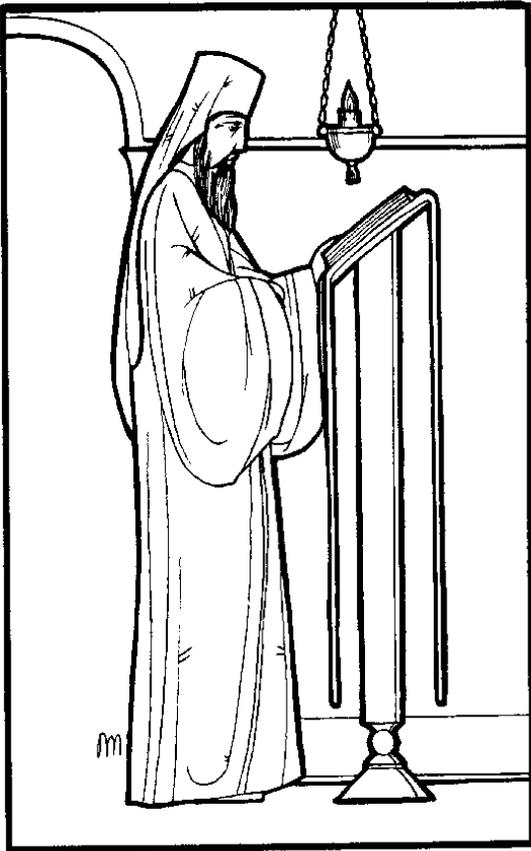
**I give Thee a kiss, but like the thief will I confess Thee: Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom.**

**May the communion of Thy Holy Mysteries be neither unto my judgement, nor to my condemnation, O Lord, but to the healing of soul and body. Amen.**

All Orthodox Christians should know this prayer by heart. At its conclusion we must approach the Holy Chalice having a firm faith in Christ and the benefits of Holy Communion, behaving with fear of God and reverence. We bow towards the community (participation in the Body and Blood of Christ and in the Church presupposes communion with each other.) We cross our hands on our breast, the right over the left. When we step before the Chalice we must clearly tell the priest our

baptismal name and open our mouths wide. After we have received Communion we say “Amen.” We do not chew the Precious Gifts, but crush them with our tongue if necessary and swallow them as soon as possible. We then go to the side table and take a piece of prosphora. This must be eaten immediately to ensure that no pieces of the Holy Mystery remain in our mouths. Women must make sure that they have removed all lipstick before partaking of the Holy Eucharist.

During Holy Communion we do not sit. If one must sit, then one does so attentively, reverently and *without talking*.



After receiving Holy Communion we must remain in Church for the Thanksgiving prayers. Many people who make sincere preparation through fasting, prayer and confession quickly return to worldly realities, and immediately immerse themselves in the same worldly conversations and vanities from which they tried to free themselves in preparation for Holy Communion. Often these conversations start in the church and the communicants hurry to leave the holy place in which they had just been “partakers of the divine nature!” (2 Pet. 1:14) It is very ill mannered to receive the greatest Gift of all and leave without thanking the Giver. To do

so is to imitate Judas who after receiving Communion, immediately went out and betrayed Christ with a kiss!

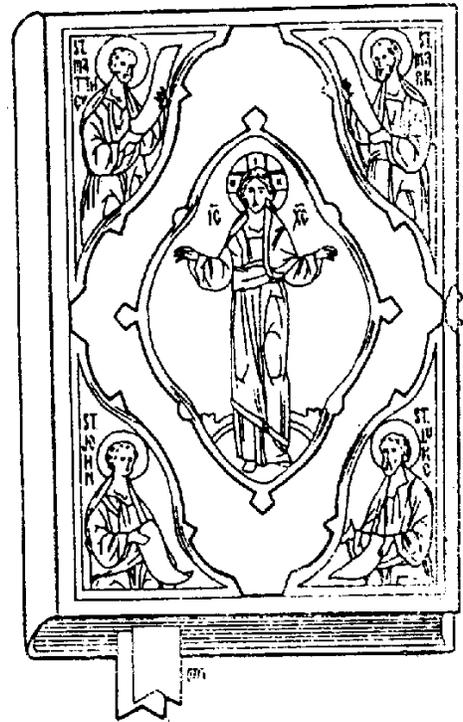
There is no better time to pray and converse with God than when He is dwelling inside us. Therefore we should listen attentively to the prayers of Thanksgiving. No food should be taken until at least a quarter of an hour after receiving Communion. And one should not smoke or indulge in worldly entertainment on the day of receiving Communion; for by doing so we only lose the Grace that we have

received. We do not kneel or make prostrations for the rest of the day in which we received Holy Communion.

In the Orthodox Church, it is important that children also receive Holy Communion and they should be the first to do so. What is important is not whether the child “understands” the Mystery, but the deification, which is accomplished by it. The Grace of God works independently of age and it is important that all baptized Orthodox Christians receive Holy Communion frequently (unless they are placed under penance by their spiritual father.) To avoid the danger of a young infant knocking the chalice, it must be carried by the mother, in her right arm, who should also hold the child’s hands.

### Hearing the Word of God

The purpose of the Church is to unite us to God and lead us to deification (theosis). Christ commanded His disciples to first teach the nations and then baptize them. The Gospel and Epistle readings as well as the sermon of the priest are of great importance as they teach us the Faith, help us to grow spiritually and incite the will to do good. Through the preaching of the Word of God, entire nations have been converted, many have embraced the monastic life having heard sermons on our Lord’s words to the rich young man and countless lives have been changed. We must give our undivided attention to every sermon in order to benefit spiritually. To whisper to our neighbours or walk out of church only serves to keep us ignorant of the truths of the Gospel. He who shows indifference to the word of God can only suffer spiritual death. It also does not help us to simply hear the sermons unless we meditate on them and apply them to our own lives. Only then can we truly benefit from them. Some are too busy applying what they hear in the sermon to others that they leave nothing over for themselves!



It is not the eloquence of the preacher, but the Truth that should attract us. It is God, not the preacher who speaks to the heart. Praise

is not due to the preacher who delivered an excellent sermon, but to the Holy Spirit who spoke through his lips. Some refuse to obey the word of God because the preacher does not practice what he preaches. Blessed Augustine compares these people to travelers who coming to a guide-post, will go no further on the road pointed out to them because the sign post itself is stationary.

### **Leaving God's House**

We must never leave the church until the service is concluded and the Dismissal announced. We are told to "Depart in peace" to which we respond, "In the name of the Lord." This teaches us exactly how we are to leave the temple. Those who have received Holy Communion must remain in Church for the Thanksgiving prayers, but everyone can benefit from these prayers. While these prayers are being read, we must remain silent and must not start any conversations until we have left the church.

The antidoron (which means "instead of the gifts") is blessed bread which comes from the part of the Prospora that has not been consecrated. It is distributed at the end of the Liturgy in order that those who have not received Holy Communion may receive a blessing. Those who have received Holy Communion do not approach to receive antidoron (nor do they venerate ikons, the Cross or kiss the priests hand.) They have received the Heavenly King Himself and have no need of any other blessing. When receiving antidoron we cross our hands, the right over the left. Antidoron must be consumed reverently and immediately. It is customary to take some home to those who through illness were not able to attend the Liturgy, but it must be consumed before any other foods and not mixed with other foods or eaten with butter or jam.

When leaving the Church, venerate the ikons again (unless one received Holy Communion. When reaching the door, turn and bow, making the sign of the Cross, before exiting.

After the Liturgy, we must wait for the priest to bless the food in the hall before we start eating and drinking.

### **Memorial Services**

Memorial Services (Mnemosyno/Panikhida) should not be held on a Sunday after the Liturgy as Sunday is the day of the Resurrection of our Lord and a day of celebration not mourning and repentance. Memorials should take place on Saturday evenings, before Vespers.

### Behaviour towards Sacred Persons

Just as we show respect for the Temple of God, the sacred objects and ceremonies, so too, we show respect for the servants of God who are consecrated to his service. It is through them that we receive the Grace of God in the Mysteries, without which salvation is impossible.



The wrong attitude towards and failure to co-operate with parish priests by many self-willed Orthodox Christians is one of the main causes of spiritual and material stagnation in any parish. This attitude stems from ignorance of the purpose of our lives, the purpose of the Church and the role of the parish and parish priest. The purpose of our lives is to be united to God and to grow in His likeness in order to attain deification (theosis.) This can only be achieved through our participation on the Mysteries, especially Holy Confession and Communion, and through our ascetical struggle to fight against the passions and live according to God's commandments. It is only through the priests that we can receive guidance in our struggle and spiritual nourishment in the Holy Mysteries of the Church. The priesthood is to the Church what the heart is to the body. Just as the heart pumps blood to the body so the priests have the authority to distribute the deifying Grace of God to the members of the Body of Christ. This authority was given by Christ to His Apostles who passed it on to their successors, the bishops and priests up unto this day.



Some parishioners refuse to assist their priest because of his character, peculiarities or even nationality. But this does not give them justification for not upholding him. Perhaps if he were working for himself, but he is not, because he is ordained by God and working to save our souls. Even if we do not care for his person, we should care for his office, his powers and his apostolate and should assist him in the cause for which he is striving.

The way we treat a priest, in his priestly capacity, is the way we treat God Himself, for Christ said: “He, who rejects you, rejects Me.” (Luke 10:16) He who abuses or despises a priest is guilty of dishonouring God, and deserves the same chastisement as those who abused and despised the Son of God. St John Chrysostom said that the lack of respect for ecclesiastical superiors is the source of all evil.

We must not only be loyal to our priests in their difficult labour of saving our souls but we must also obey them in spiritual matters and take heed to their counsel. They are specially trained for their ministry and through the Gift of the Holy Spirit they know better than us what we require. The Apostle Paul directs us to, “Obey your superiors and be subject to them, for they keep watch as having to render account of our souls.” (Heb. 13:17) The Apostolic Constitutions (Book 11, Part 33) teach us to obey our spiritual fathers, “Because they received from God the power of life and death, the power to judge sinners and condemn them, but of those who repent, to loose them from sins and return them to life.”

One of the ways in which we show our reverence for the Priesthood is by asking our priests and bishops for their blessing. We receive a blessing in the following manner:

1. We approach the priest or bishop without making the sign of the Cross
2. We place our right hand, palm upward, on our left hand in the form of the Cross
3. We bow our heads and ask the priest to bless us, saying, “Father, bless!”
4. The bishop or priest makes the Sign of the Cross in blessing over us, then places his right hand in our palm.



5. The person who has received the blessing then kisses the right hand which blessed him as a sign of love and respect for the authority of the office held by the bishop or priest and in thankfulness for receiving a blessing from the Lord's representative.

#### A Note to Parents

Of all parental duties, bringing up children in the Orthodox Christian Faith is the most important. Parents ought to instruct their children in the fundamentals of the Faith and, just as importantly, teach them how to behave in Church; when to stand and sit and how and when to make the sign of the Cross. This is primarily done by setting a good example, which makes a far more lasting impression than words do. One of the best ways to do this and to make Jesus Christ the center of the "home church" is to practice family prayer. There should be a space set aside in the home with ikons, the Holy Cross, Holy Bible, a vigil lamp and Holy Water where the family gathers for daily prayer and where the children are encouraged to participate according to their ability. Children who see that their parents have respect for holy things, places and people will grow up to show the same respect.

#### The Mystery of Repentance and Confession

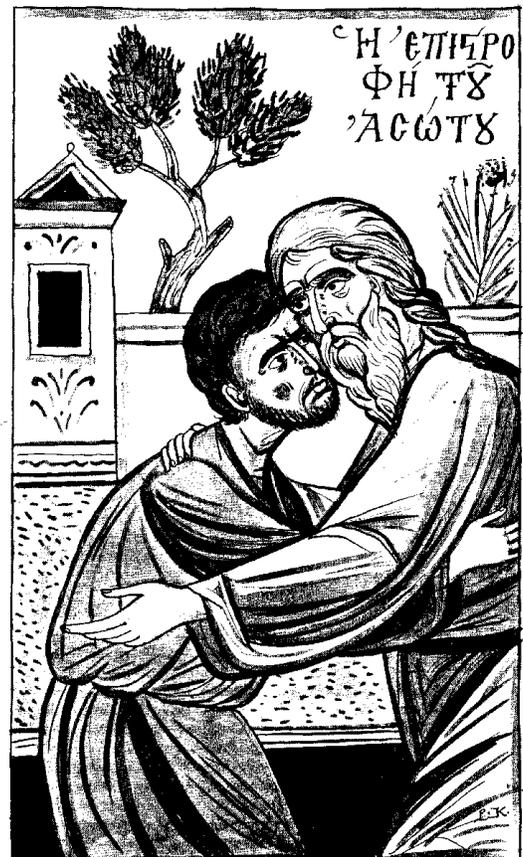
This Mystery has two aspects. First there is the personal repentance of each member of the Body of Christ or of the Body as a whole. The Greek word for repentance, "metanoia" literally means "a change of mind" - to change our way of thinking. It is the realisation that we have departed from God and that we have done things that are against God's will. It is the recognition of our weakness and sinfulness and the



Ἀναχωρηταὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου

desire to return to God. Secondly there is the fact that God has given the power to forgive sins to those who bear the grace of the special priesthood – the bishops and priests. This forgiveness is granted in the mystery of Confession when we confess our sins in the presence of our priest/spiritual father who then reads the prayer of forgiveness. It is important here to note that when we go to confession we are confessing to God in the presence of the priest and that it is God, not the priest, who forgives our sins. God gives the priest the power to proclaim on His behalf that our sins are forgiven. *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained”* (John 20:23) Some claim that confessing to a priest is not biblical, but in fact it is quite the opposite. There is no biblical foundation to confessing to God alone, which is a refusal to acknowledge sin to the rest of the Body. St James says, *“Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed* (James 5:16) and St John warns that *“if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:8-9) In the ancient Church, as with all the Mysteries, the whole Church gathered and everyone confessed publicly. It was only as the Church grew and public confession became more difficult that the priest would hear confession individually on behalf of the people.

Many people argue that they can talk to their friends or a psychologist about their problems and it makes them feel better. It might make them feel better for a while but it doesn't cure the underlying problem of sin. The forgiveness of our sins in the Mystery of Confession is the only true psychotherapy (“soul therapy.”) Once our sins have been forgiven they are wiped away. The penance that a priest may give is not a legalistic punishment but rather medicine for the healing of our souls. When a person is ill the doctor prescribes certain medicines in order to restore his physical health. If the person then chooses not to take



them, he is only to blame himself if he doesn't get well. The Church is a Spiritual Hospital and God's commandments or the penance that our confessor might give us are medicinal prescriptions aimed at restoring our spiritual health. A sick person cannot function properly and so it seems illogical that someone would choose to remain ill instead being restored to health, both physical and spiritual.

Orthodox Christians should go to confession at least four times a year. However, it is to our spiritual benefit to make frequent confession, thereby making peace with God and ourselves.

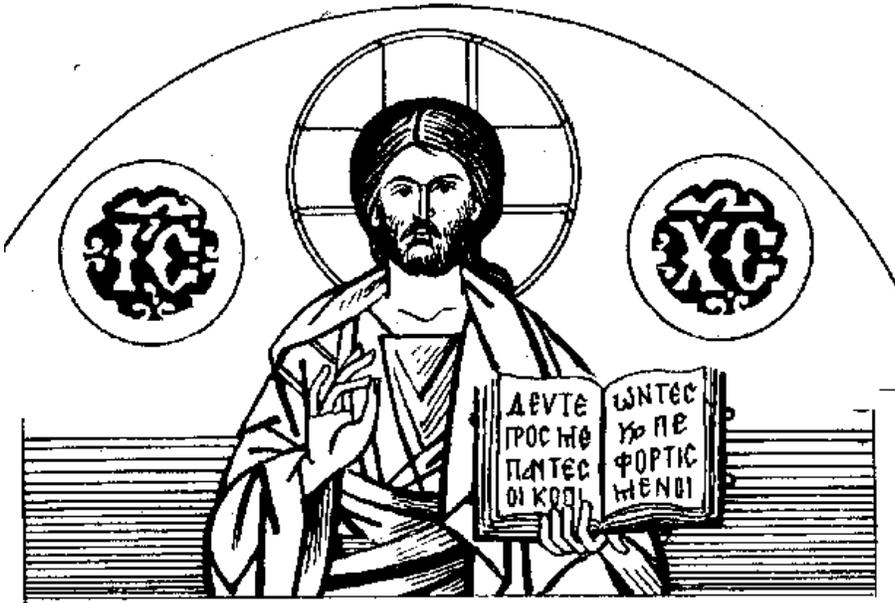
### The Spiritual Benefit of Attending Church

The spiritual benefit we receive from regularly attending Church is enormous. This is why the Holy Fathers exhort us never to be absent from the divine services. St Maximos the Confessor writes that "every Christian should frequent the holy Church of God and not be absent from the holy gathering that takes place in the Temple. Firstly because inside the Church, are the holy Angels who record the names of those who enter, present them to God and intercede for them. Secondly, because the Grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in the Temple, though in a special way at the time of the holy gathering, and it



transforms each of those present (in relation to his receptiveness.) It transfigures him and truly recreates him towards the more divine and guides him to the symbolism of the mysteries being celebrated, even if he himself is not aware of it, if he belongs to the infants in Christ."

The Temple in which the Divine Liturgy is celebrated is heaven itself. There the angels and the Triune God are present. The faithful who actively participate in the Divine Liturgy is transported from



earth to heaven. St John Chrysostom says, "Nothing fills our lives with so much joy as the delight we feel in the Church. The joy of happy people is safeguarded in the Church. The Church is the desire of the embittered, the contentment of the sorrowful, the comfort of the

unfortunate, the rest of the weary. For Christ says, "*Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" What is sweeter than this invitation? When the Lord invites you to the Church, He invites you to a feast. He urges you to rest and not to labour, he carries you from hardships to rest, relieving you from the weight of sins."

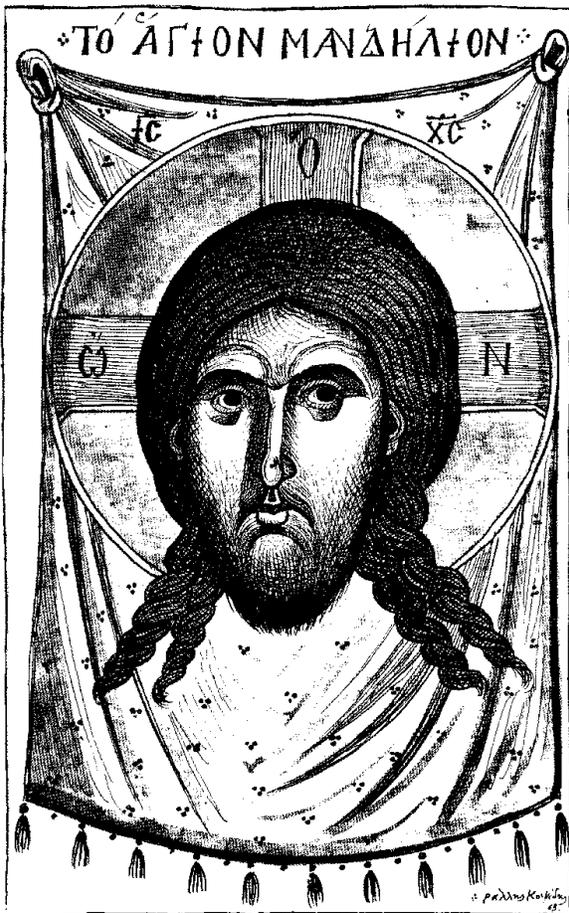
The participation of the faithful in the Divine Liturgy and other common prayers of the Church, helps to heal us from passions and to acquire virtues. As St John Chrysostom tells us, "The Temple is a spiritual hospital and those who come here, once they have received the required medicine and placed it on their wounds, must return to their homes."

Many of today's Christians, seeing the increase of evil in the world lose hope and think that only a few faithful have remained with the Lord. Our presence in the Church has the following benefit: it strengthens the brethren in their struggle and unites them to other struggling brethren. St John reminds us that the first Christians spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, "the reason being that they never abandoned their gatherings, but were always together, passing the day in church with prayers and hearing the word of God. This is why they lit such a great flame, this is why they were never split apart, but drew in the whole world to God." This is why we are called to imitate the first Christians "and to run to each gathering that takes place in the Temple for the benefit of the Church and for our own

benefit. And if some desire is burning you up you will be able to extinguish it easily just by looking at the house of God. If you are being controlled by anger, with ease you will put the beast to sleep. And if again some other passion has besieged you, you will easily be able to stop the tempest and bring calm and much peace inside your soul, which we pray that every one of us will enjoy, with the Grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

### After Going to Church

The person who has communed of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ “in the fear of God, in faith and in love” leaves the church as a new person. He has received Christ Himself within him. When he leaves the Temple of the Lord he takes the peace of God into the world with him. He becomes a witness of God’s love to his fellow men. St John Chrysostom exhorts us to, “ Draw our brethren into the Church, admonish those who are deluded, advise them not only with words, but also with deeds. Teaching by our behaviour, by life, is greater. And even if you say nothing, but leave the divine gathering, showing those who were absent with your appearance, with your countenance, with



your voice, with your gait and with your over all modesty, the benefits you took from the Church and went out, that is enough for admonition and advice. For, thus should we leave here, as from a holy sanctuary, as if we have descended from the heavens themselves... Teach all those who do not come to Church that you chanted with the Seraphim, that you belong to a divine state, that you are registered in the choir of angels, that you spoke to the Lord, that you were together with Christ. If we keep ourselves in check in this way, it won’t be necessary to say anything to those who were absent when we leave here. But from our own benefit they will feel their own loss and will speedily

run to the church to enjoy the same benefits. Because, seeing the beauty of your soul, even if they are the most indifferent of all, they will love your own grace.”

St John also tells us how the Divine Liturgy also helps us in the spiritual struggle we continue when we leave the church, “The Holy Blood of the Lord waters our soul giving it great strength. If we receive that Blood worthily, it drives away the demons and keeps them far away from us while drawing near to us the angels and the Lord of the angels... Those who commune of that Holy blood stand together with the Angels, the Archangels and the heavenly powers, they wear the royal garment of Christ and carry spiritual weapons. But I have not yet said the most important. They have been robed in the Kingdom itself.”

### **Why Don't You Come to Church?**

We have seen, briefly some of the many blessings the faithful obtain when they regularly come to Church and participate in the Holy Mysteries. We have also seen that the Church excommunicates those who willingly separate themselves from her in order to bring them to repentance and return them to the Church. Still there are many people who for various reasons stay away from the Church and deprive themselves of the blessings we receive. Let us take a look at some of these excuses:

#### **Working on a Sunday:**

Many claim they cannot come to Church on a Sunday because they need to work to support themselves and their families. St Kosmas Aitolos tells us however, “We must work for six days for these vain, earthly, and false things and on the Lord's day we stop working and go to church to reflect on our sins, on death, on hell and Paradise. To reflect on our soul which is more honourable than the entire world and not to over-eat and over-drink and commit sins. Neither should we work or do business on Sunday. Whatever profit you make on Sunday is lost and cursed and you bring fire and curse into your house and not prayer and blessing...”

Just give Me two hours of the feast day, the Lord asks each one of us. “Even better,” says St John Chrysostom. “Don't give the two hours to Me, but to yourself, so that you will leave the church filled with blessings” In the Divine Liturgy we are transported from earth to

heaven and when we leave we take with us, “the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

**Work at home and rest:**

It is not only our professional business that keeps us away from Church, but also work around the house. Many women say the Sunday is the only day they have to clean the house and make food etc...Especially nowadays when women are working outside the house this excuse does not seem unreasonable. But the truth is that a woman who loves the Church will find time to do these things without being deprived of attending Church.

Men, on the other hand who work all week see Sunday as an opportunity for rest and recreation and therefore don't go to Church. This is because they have not experienced the true rest and communion with God that the Divine Liturgy gives to those who are weary. They would rather run off to the golf course or the tennis court or go fishing and return home having suffered bodily and often spiritual exertion. Or they spend the day in front of the television, a cause of great spiritual harm. Prayer, on the other hand, would give him peace of soul and rest from his labours.

**Mourning:**

Mourning is another excuse used by those who do not attend Church, saying that they don't want people to see them as if the Church was a place of worldly entertainment. In this way the Devil succeeds in distancing us from the Church at one of the times when we and our loved one who has passed away, can benefit most from our presence and prayers in the House of God. This is the time when we should go more frequently to Church for divine consolation and to pray for the rest of the soul of our beloved.

**Other excuses:**



Aside from those we have already mentioned, there are countless other excuses for why some people won't come to Church. Some don't like the priest, others don't like the chanters or the choir or the committee. Some claim they don't have suitable clothes to wear, as if it were a formal function. Some think it is enough just to light a candle and leave again. Others claim that the incense bothers them. Many say they don't need to go to church in order to worship God. The fact is, however that all these excuses are temptations from the Devil. He is behind every excuse ever made for not coming to Church because nothing terrifies him more than people who attend Church regularly and partake of the Holy Mysteries. St John Chrysostom warns that those who distance themselves from their father's house, in other words, the Church, easily fall prey to heretics who remove from them the golden jewel of faith and drown them in their filthy teachings.

The Holy Church of Christ calls us, like a loving mother, to participate frequently in all the Mysteries, services and prayers. She reminds us of the dangers of distancing ourselves from the Body of Christ. And if in the end we don't hear the voice of the Church, the voice of Christ Himself calling us, then the words of Christ apply to us, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin." (John 15:22) The Church is inviting you to the Lord's feast in the Kingdom of God. It's up to you to come and "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 33LLX/34)

This booklet was compiled by Julia Bridget Hayes

### **Bibliography:**

1. The Orthodox Companion, Rev David F. Abramtsov
2. Practical Guide to Orthodoxy and Orthopraxia, Priest Michael
3. Councils for Life, From the Life and Teachings of Fr Epiphanius Theodoropoulos
4. Prayer Book, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY
5. Our Bearing in Church or Liturgical Behaviour, Unknown
6. Ο Εκκλησιασμός, Ιερομονάχου Γρηγορίου
7. Το Σημείο του Σταυρού – Δύναμη, Σημασία και Θαυματά του, Ι.Μ Παρακλήτου, Ωρωπός Αττικής
- 8.

Orthodox Church of St Nicholas of Japan

Holy Archbishopric of Johannesburg and Pretoria

**156 Fulham Road**

**Brixton**

**Johannesburg**

