

Liturgical Traditions: Questions Asked by Catechumens about Orthodox Worship

Prepared for St. Herman of Alaska Mission, Surrey, B.C.
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On many bottles containing medicine, it is customary to affix a Warning Label, telling the person how and when to take the medicine inside. This is done because if we take the medicine improperly, at the wrong time or in the incorrect amount, it can do us harm and not good and, in fact, can even be lethal.

It is the same with rules and traditions in the Church. Like earthly medicine, church rules are good and can promote health, but only if used properly. Though good in themselves, they can make us spiritually sick if improperly used, and can even be lethal.

What is the proper way to use church rules and liturgical traditions? First of all, by recognizing that the Christian Faith is not a religion of rules and regulations and that rules can never give life. The rules are not ends in themselves; they are aids to bring us closer to our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can give us life. Our focus should never be on the rules alone; it must always be on our relationship with the Lord. Our keeping of the rules must be subordinated to this final goal of serving and loving Him.

Secondly, we should not think that the rules are immutable and absolute or that they should never be broken under any circumstances. We should indeed always strive to keep the rules and local customs, because that is the way of humility. To think of oneself as more spiritual than one's brethren and thus exempt from the rules which govern them, is prideful, and this sort of spiritual pride is found only in the way of death. So we should strive to conform to the usages of the fellow family-members in the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, keeping the rules is not the goal; loving God and one's neighbour is the goal. The rules are only there to help us accomplish this and this sometimes means that we must break the "letter" of the rule in order to keep its true "spirit". This was clearly seen by the spiritual Masters we call "the Desert Fathers". Though they kept the fast quite rigorously, they would break it without hesitation in order to keep the greater demands of charity, eating meat with an unexpected visitor, for instance, even though it was a day on which meat was not ordinarily to be eaten.

Finally, we should never under any circumstances judge our brother if he does not keep the rules as we do. To do this makes us Pharisees, not true Christians and dishonours our Lord. "For this reason," says St. Paul, quoting the Prophet Isaiah, "the Name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:24). All of our rules, customs and usages are to promote devotion to God and love for one another. If we fail in this, we fail in all. "The purpose of the commandment," writes St. Paul, "is love from a pure heart" (1 Tim.1:5). The following traditions, rules and customs are given to us by the Church for no other purpose but to achieve this end. If we keep them properly, in this way, they will not prove harmful but good, to our ultimate benefit and to the greater glory of God.

1) “How should one dress for Church? Should women wear a veil?”

Standards of appropriate dress for Church **differ from place to place**, reflecting, to some degree, country of origin and age of the parishioners. Certainly all dress should be modest and clean.

A modern view is that standards of dress does not matter at all—that because “God looks upon the inner heart of man” (which He does), therefore the outer vesture has no significance. The problem with this view is that the outer is always a reflection of inner. This is why one dresses “up” for important occasions (such as job interviews and dates). How much more then, should one take care to dress appropriately to commune with the King of Heaven!

In fact, how one dresses is a part of one’s **inner and spiritual preparation** to come to worship—a continuation of the process that begins with attending Saturday Vigil and saying preparation prayers the evening before. The priest’s liturgical dress is a part of *his* inner preparation to celebrate the Mysteries (thus he prays certain prayers as he puts on each piece of clothing) and in the same way, our dressing should be a part of *our* preparation. Thus it was in the ancient church: indeed, it was commented by the Emperor Julian that the Christians always put on their best clothes to worship God!

Regarding the **womanly use of the veil**, once again, practices differ from place to place. Prior to the middle of this 20th century, the feminine head-covering was universal, as a sign of submission to God and of proper domestic order. (It still is the majority practice in Orthodoxy outside North America.)

Now however it is not universally required. (It would seem that the Roman Catholics after Vatican 2 received permission to abandon the veil and the Orthodox and Protestants followed suit as well!)

St. Paul, of course, reflecting the cultural practice of his day, mandated its use (in 1 Corinthians 11). In that time, an unveiled woman was making a statement about her rejection of her husband’s authority and so the Apostle required all Christian women to be veiled. In our culture, feminine head-coverings no longer have this significance and so many pious women attend worship without a veil. This (at St. Herman’s parish) is completely acceptable.

There is, however, another option. Many other women (at St. Herman’s and in other mission parishes) see the veil as a way of rejoicing in their femininity. They wear the veil, *not* because it is required, but because they *want* to. For them, it is a sign that they, as women, are different from the men; and that this difference is good. In this way, the use of the veil is a part of the emerging Orthodox Christian counter-culture, an alternative to the unisex secularism of the dominant culture surrounding us.

The decision to wear a veil or not is a personal one, to be made only by the women themselves. One should make one’s decision and rejoice in it, always being careful not to judge one’s sisters who make a different choice.

2) “What do I do when I first enter the church temple?”

First of all, one should take care **not to be late** for the service. Rushing into the temple after the service has begun shows a lack of respect for the Lord. We would take care not to be late for an audience with an earthly King—or even for work or school. How much more should we not be late for our weekly meeting with our heavenly King! In fact, not only should we not be *late*, we should take care to be *early*! This will give us the required time to “center” ourselves, to find the inner peace and preparation we need to bring ourselves into the presence God.

As soon as we enter the church temple, we make the Sign of the Cross, acknowledging the holiness of the place set apart for the worship of Christ. (Some will also make a low bow from the waist.) As we enter

this holy place, we are reminded that this is not the time to chat or to greet our fellows; rather, we should immediately focus our hearts on the Lord. (We may greet our neighbours by a silent nod and a smile.)

Proceeding to the icon-stand in the middle of the church, we come to the icon of the church's patron saint there and kiss the icon. In this way, we greet our heavenly patron (or honour the Lord or His Mother whose Feast it is, if the icon on the stand is a festal icon). The way to venerate any icon is like this: we twice make the Sign of the Cross and bow from waist, then make the Sign of the Cross again and venerate the icon by kissing it. (If it is an icon of the Lord, we kiss His feet; if of the Theotokos, we kiss the Lord's feet and then her hand; if of a saint, we kiss his hand or the Gospel he holds.) We then make the Sign of the Cross and bow from the waist the third time.

After venerating the icon in the middle, we may **proceed to the iconstas** (icon-screen) at the front. Once again, we venerate the icons on the iconstas (using the same ritual gestures as before). After greeting the heavenly Church in this manner, we may greet the earthly Church, our fellow-worshippers, by bowing to the assembled faithful.

Next, it is customary to **light a candle**. We go to the candle-stand, select as many candles as we wish (they are available for a small charge to cover the cost), pray silently to the Lord and then plant the candle before the icon there. The burning candle symbolizes our prayer, which continues to ascend to the throne of God and gives light to the darkened world.

Finally, **we take our place** in the nave (the main part of the church) and stand in prayerful readiness, waiting for the service to start. In this way, we will have gathered our attention and prepared our hearts to worship the King.

We normally **stand** throughout the service for worship and prayer. If fatigued (the legs of the convert are usually the last part of the body to become Orthodox!) one may sit. But certainly one should stand for the opening exclamation "Blessed is the Kingdom...", for the Little Entrance, the Trisagion, the Gospel, the Cherubic Hymn (when we "lay aside all earthly cares") and the Creed, the Anaphora (after the Deacon says "Let us stand aright!") and whenever the priest censens or blesses us.

3) "May I take a new name when I am baptized or chrismated?"

Yes! It is an old and pious custom to take the name of Saint when one is thus received into the Church and this is something that can be done if desired. Normally, one would then be called by that name at all other times as well—and not just when in church. (Sometimes this is not advisable, such as when one is in a "mixed" marriage to a non-Orthodox partner. In that case, one would be called by one's new "Saint's" name while in Church, and by the older "secular" name at other times.)

When one chooses a patron saint in this way (in close consultation with the priest, who actually bestows the desired name), one then has a special relationship with that Saint. The Saint's feast-day is kept as one's own "**Namesday**", in much the same way as birthdays are celebrated in non-Orthodox cultures. (For example, if one's Orthodox name was "Lawrence" and one's patron saint "St. Lawrence of Rome", one's Namesday would be the feast-day of St. Lawrence on August 10.)

The new name is actually bestowed by the Church during the Service of Baptism or Chrismation. During that Service, one will stand with the two **Sponsors** chosen for that purpose. The Sponsors will both be mature Orthodox Christians, who form the link between the newly-received and the church community. (It is customary to have both a man and a woman as sponsors.) The Sponsors' responsibility is to pray for their new "godchild", to keep in touch on the Namesday and to be available to provide on-going Christian encouragement and support. They also usually provide a gift of the baptismal cross given in the Service.

4) “How and when should I make the Sign of the Cross?”

In answering this question, it must be first understood that, because the Christian life is not governed by a legalistic spirit, it is not a sin or mistake to “make the Sign of the Cross at the ‘wrong’ time”. If one makes the Sign of the Cross in love and faith, to honour the Lord, it can never be wrong!

One may bless oneself by making the Sign of the Cross any time. Indeed, the faithful often use the Sign of the Cross throughout the day, such as when beginning a journey or commencing any good work. It is used to bless one’s food at meal-time, and to ask God’s blessing upon loved ones at bed-time. It is piously used upon hearing of any disaster, as we ask for God’s mercy on those in need.

It is, of course, also used at certain times in the liturgical services of the Church. In this matter, different jurisdictions have somewhat different customs: the Greeks and Antiochians, for example, make the Sign of the Cross when the priest censures them, while the Russians do not, but simply bow. These are local customs, not Gospel precepts or dogmas.

What follows, therefore, is one way of honouring Christ in the services by making the Sign of His Cross.

The Sign of the Cross is made, in the Eastern Church, **in the following way**: one joins one’s thumb to the first and second fingertips, folding the fourth and little finger down upon the palm of the hand. One then touches one’s forehead, breast, right and then left shoulder, saying “In the Name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

As for **when** the Sign is made in the Church’s services, a great variety of practice may be observed. Often people will make the Sign whenever a particular petition or prayer moves them—old men, for example, may bless themselves with the Sign whenever the petition for “a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless and peaceful” is chanted. But as well as this kind of personal choice of moments to use the Sign, other moments are customary and wide-spread.

The Sign of the Cross is to be made:

- whenever one enters or leaves the Church Temple;
 - whenever one crosses the Temple, passing before the Royal Doors;
 - at each singing of “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, glory to You, O God!” at the conclusion of sets of psalms;
 - at every ascription of praise to the Trinity at the conclusion of prayers, (such as, “... and to You we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...”)
 - at Vespers and Matins, when we sing in the Evening Prayer and in the Great Doxology “Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes”;
 - at the Trisagion Prayer, (each time we sing “Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal...”);
 - at the reference to each of the Persons of the Godhead in the Creed (i.e. at “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty”, at “in one Lord, Jesus Christ” and at “in the Holy Spirit”);
- It is also customary to bless oneself with the Sign of the Cross before and after holy acts, such as kissing icons or other holy objects.

In this, as in all things, it is of great importance to do all to the honour of Jesus Christ and steadfastly refuse to judge one’s neighbour should he choose a different way of honouring the Lord. The Sign of the Cross is given to us from apostolic times as a great blessing—we should not let it become an occasion of contentious legalism but rather use it in love and rejoice in the Lord’s love for us. For it was this love which led Him to the Cross, to die for us and claim all of us for His own.

5) “When does the priest use incense in the Liturgy and what do I do when he censures me?”

The use of incense goes back to the early church, a universal practice that the Church borrowed from secular civic functions—as the secular Imperial court honoured the King and his ministers by burning

incense before them, so the Church honoured God, the King of Heaven and His heavenly Court of the Saints, by also offering incense.

Thus today, the priest *begins the Divine Liturgy* by offering incense. Adding incense to the censer, he prays “We offer You incense, O Christ our God, for an odour of spiritual fragrance. Receive it upon Your heavenly altar and send down upon us in return the grace of Your all-holy Spirit.” He then censes the Altar Table, then the Table of Oblation (in the corner, where the Gifts of Bread and Wine are prepared for the service), and then the rest of the altar area. He then censes the icons on the iconostas.

Then he **censes the people**, the living icons of Christ. **In response**, the people do not cross themselves, but **rise** (if they are sitting) and **bow slightly** in thanksgiving for the incense. (This is our Slavic tradition; the Greeks and Antiochians make the Sign of the Cross here.) The priest then goes throughout the church temple, censing the icons on the walls. (The people do not cross themselves or bow as he passes, since he is not now censing *them*, but rather the icons. (In temples where the absence of all pews allows this, the people move a bit into the center of the church to let the priest pass by along the edge of the interior.) The priest concludes the opening offering of incense by censing once again the Royal Doors and the icons of the Saviour and the Theotokos, returning finally to the altar.

During the Liturgy, the priest again censes the people, first of all as a preparation for reading the Gospel and a second time later on, at the Cherubic Hymn, as a preparation for their reception of the Holy Gifts. (As before, the people respond by rising and bowing slightly as the priest censes them.)

This response of the people is part of the on-going inter-action and liturgical dialogue between the priest and his flock. This response binds them all together as they offer the one Sacrifice of praise in the Holy Eucharist.

6) “How often should I receive Holy Communion and how should I prepare myself?”

A baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christian should receive Holy Communion **every time he attends the Divine Liturgy**. This is what the Church, in her Liturgy, orders him to do. For the Deacon (or Priest), immediately after the Communion of the clergy, comes forth with the Chalice and says to all the faithful, “In the fear of God and with faith and love, draw near!” In saying this, he is expressing the Church’s liturgical and Traditional expectation and demand that all the attending faithful will draw near and receive Holy Communion. (This presupposes, of course, that one is not under any excommunicating penance and that one has prepared oneself in the proper way.)

This is **how one should prepare oneself** to receive this precious Gift. On the previous evening, if possible, one should *attend the service of Great Vespers or Vigil*. If one cannot attend this service, one should spend the time as quietly and prayerfully as possible—certainly going to a party is not the way to prepare!

From midnight, the adult communicant should *eat or drink nothing*. (Sometimes one may have an “economy” or dispensation to drink a little water if one has a special reason—such as singing in the Choir.) Also, the married Orthodox couple are expected to *fast conjugally* and not come together the night before receiving Holy Communion. (Obviously this presupposes that both the spouses are Orthodox and are of one mind in this delicate matter.)

Also, one should *say the appointed pre-Communion Preparation prayers*, according to one’s own rule. These prayers are available in any Orthodox Prayerbook. One need not say *all* the prayers there. The priest can help determine how many and which ones to say. The number of prayers is less important than the spirit in which they are said. They should, like all prayers, be said slowly and intently, concentrating on the meaning and offering them to the Lord.

Finally, one should *come in humility, penitence and peace*. We come in humility, knowing we are not and never can be worthy of the Gift of Holy Communion. Rather, the Lord feeds us with His Divine

Body and Blood precisely because we are *not* worthy and in order to *make* us worthy. We come in penitence, sorrowing for our sins and trusting in His invincible mercy and compassion for us. We come in peace, having forgiven everyone who has sinned against us, hurt us or vexed us. For if we do not forgive them, we can have no forgiveness ourselves and will eat and drink, not salvation, but rather condemnation.

We can then *approach the Divine Chalice* fully prepared to receive the Holy Mysteries. Standing in line with our brothers and sisters, we fold our hands over our breast (left arm over right), praying with peace and joy in our heart, and so receive our Lord. (We do not make the Sign of the Cross either before or after immediately receiving Holy Communion, as the Divine Gifts are Themselves the true Blessing and need not be “supplemented” by any additional blessing ourselves with the Sign of the Cross.) After receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, those holding the Communion cloth should wipe the lips of the communicant; if they do not, one should do it oneself.

Regarding the sacrament of Confession: it is not necessary (at St. Herman’s) to come to confession before the priest each week before receiving Holy Communion. Rather, one should come to confess according to one’s need and rule (usually every 6 weeks or so). The practice of Confession is indeed part of one’s ongoing spiritual discipline, but it is not tied to each reception of Holy Communion. (In places where the faithful receive Communion only a few times a year, it is indeed the rule to precede this infrequent Communion with Confession.)

All of the above presupposes the normal adult communicant. Young children do not fast; nor do the very old and infirm; nor do pregnant women; nor do the sick. (If in doubt about whether or not to fast, consult the priest.)

7) “How do I receive the Antidoran at the end of the Liturgy?”

The Antidoran (or Evlogia, as it is called in some churches) is the Blessed Bread that the priest distributes at the end of the Service, when one comes to venerate the Cross and receive his blessing.

For every Divine Liturgy, 5 small loaves (called “prospora” or “offerings”) are offered at a short service before the Liturgy, called the “proskomedion” (or “preparation”). One of these loaves is used for the “Lamb” which will be sanctified for the Holy Communion. Particles are removed from the remaining 4 prosphoras, as saints and faithful are commemorated by the priest during the Proskomedion. It is the remaining Bread from this service that is received after the Divine Liturgy as “Antidoran”. (The term “antidoran” means “instead of the (Eucharistic) Gifts”, since in situations where the faithful do not receive Holy Communion, this functioned as a substitute.) This (non-Eucharistic) blessed bread is received by the Orthodox communicants immediately **after Communion** (along with a sip of unconsecrated wine). It serves as a “cover” for the Eucharistic Gifts, to “wash Them down”. At St. Herman’s, Antidoran is also received **again at the conclusion of the Liturgy**, when all go up to venerate the Cross held by the priest and to receive his blessing. It is received by all those present (even the non-Orthodox) as a token of the love and bounty of God and as a sign of fellowship in Christ.

The proper way to receive this gift from the priest is as follows: the one receiving Antidoran puts his right hand over his left, the cupped palms held face up. The Antidoran is placed reverently in the hand (it is a pious custom sometimes followed for the one receiving to bend down and kiss the priest’s hand as he places the antidoran in the hand). One then eats the bread from one’s hand. Receiving the Antidoran in this way assures that it does not fall on the floor by accident.

8) “When am I supposed to fast?”

The Church prescribes an **absolute fast** (no eating or drinking at all) from midnight onwards, for those who plan to receive Holy Communion at the Liturgy the next morning.

As well, there are certain periods in the Church Year when there is a **fast of abstinence** from certain foods, basically of meat (which includes chicken), fish and dairy (which includes milk, eggs and cheese). These fasts are observed from midnight to midnight (that is, a Wednesday fast, for example, would begin at Wednesday midnight and end at Thursday midnight).

We abstain from meat, fish and dairy on most *Wednesdays and Fridays* of the year.

We also abstain during the four fasting seasons: during *Great Lent* (a fast of 40-plus days preceding Pascha), the *Apostles' Fast* (of variable length, leading up to the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29), the *Dormition Fast* (during the first two weeks of August, leading up to the Feast of the Dormition on August 15) and the *Nativity Fast* (the 40 days preceding Christmas and beginning November 15). During these fasting seasons, the married faithful are urged to fast conjugally as well (assuming, of course, that both partners are committed Orthodox Christians).

As well, there are certain other fast days when a strictly Lenten diet is observed, such as the *Elevation of the Holy Cross* on September 14, the *Theophany eve* (January 5), the *Beheading of St. John the Baptizer* (August 29).

Further, we do not eat or drink at all until after sundown on *Great and Holy Friday*.

That's a lot of fasting! But it is *mitigated somewhat*. During certain days in the Apostles' Fast and the Nativity Fast, fish is allowed. Also, even in Great Lent, fish is allowed at Annunciation (March 25) and on Palm Sunday. And all fasting is suspended from Christmas to Theophany eve, for the week following the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (before Great Lent), for the entire Paschal season (i.e. from Pascha to Ascension) and for the week following Pentecost.

These are the basic rules and they are set as the goal to be attained. Obviously, certain persons are exempt from the full rigour of the rule: children and the very old or infirm, pregnant women and nursing mothers as well as those with a medical condition which would preclude the full fasting discipline. When in doubt, one should consult the priest.

Also, it should be noted that these rules *presuppose an Orthodox Christian environment*. Persons who live in other environments—for example, one who lives with a non-Orthodox spouse, or who lives at home where the rest of the family is not Orthodox—would be wise not to force their own fasting discipline on others. The spiritual benefit of fasting comes from it being personally and freely chosen, and so the non-Orthodox members of the family who are forced to fast would derive no real benefit. Indeed, they may come to resent the Orthodox member—and the Orthodox Faith! Sensitivity and spiritual discernment are necessary in determining how much to fast in this environment.

In a truly Orthodox environment such as the parish Church, it is of course otherwise. There we may strive for fidelity to the rule. All persons are urged to bring food to the after-Liturgy Coffee Hour and we are reminded to bring food in conformity with the fasting calendar (for example, no meat on a fast day).

9) “What about Confession?”

One should make an examination of conscience **every day**, before going to bed, confessing one's sins to God and receiving His forgiveness. This is our normal daily practice. But as well, if the conscience is especially burdened by some weighty sin and one cannot find peace (or wants the counsel and spiritual advice of the priest about the struggle with sin), one can go to sacramental Confession immediately as well. Though we should have a discipline of regularly going to Confession (every 6 weeks or so, or perhaps during the four fasting seasons of the Church Year), one **need not wait** until the next regularly “scheduled” Confession, but may go as often as one feels the need.

The **best time for Confession** is in connection with Great Vespers or Vigil before the Liturgy. (At St. Herman's, it is most convenient for all if one comes early to Vigil and confesses *before* the service.) But one may come to Confession at any time. (It is considering poor “etiquette” to come on Sunday morning

just before Divine Liturgy, as the priest is usually busy then and will not have the necessary time to confess properly.)

The **way to prepare for Confession** is as follows: *take some time* to be alone with the Lord and thoroughly search the heart. Books are available with questions to ask oneself to aid this process of introspection. Some people jot down their sins on a piece of paper and bring this with them to consult during Confession itself; others confess from memory. The method is not important. What *is* important is the thoroughness and honesty of the search and truly repenting of one's sins. Note: the *feelings* attached to this introspection are of no value in themselves. The aim is not to feel bad. The aim is to bring one's life before the Lord, expressing sorrow and regret and resolving to strive again for holiness.

In coming to Confession, the penitent approaches the priest and faces the icon (at St. Herman's, we face the large icon of the Cross, kneeling, as it were, at the foot of the Cross of Christ.) The priest places his stole over the head of the penitent, covering him with the mercy of God. He places his arm around the penitent's shoulder, as in solidarity with a fellow-sinner and prays for God to accept the offered penitence. Then it is time to share with the priest one's secret sins, uncovered during the prior time of introspection. (Whatever is said to the priest is revealed to no one—and is usually soon forgotten by the priest himself!) The priest may then offer words of advice. As a therapeutic aid in the on-going struggle against sin, he may impose a penance—usually prostrations—though this is quite rare in Orthodoxy. After this, the priest lays hands on the head of the penitent and prays for God's forgiveness. The peace of God is poured upon the heart. He stands aright, forgiven and joyful. He kisses the Gospel and Cross before him (if they are kept there), and then the hand of the penitent. They exchange the kiss of peace and the penitent departs, a free man in Christ.

10) “What is the proper way to ask for the priest's blessing?”

In the Slavic tradition, one may ask a blessing from a priest or bishop, though not from a deacon, seminarian or simple monk or one in the so-called “Minor Orders” of Sub-deacon or Reader. (The Greek tradition is more flexible and asks blessings from monks and even seminarians as well.)

One way to **ask a blessing** is to approach the priest (or bishop), bow from the waist, touching the ground with the right hand, and then cup the hands together, the right hand over the left, saying to the priest “Father, bless!” (or “Master, bless!”, if to a bishop). (One does not then make the Sign of the Cross, for the priest will do this as the blessing.) The priest giving the blessing says a word, invoking the blessing of God (usually “Blessed is our God, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages!”) and makes the Sign of the Cross over the person. He then puts his hand in the offered right hand of the person asking the blessing, who then kisses his hand. The Kiss of Peace is then exchanged on each cheek. (Russians traditionally exchange a triple kiss, Greeks and Antiochians, a double kiss.)

It is in this way that the pious greet their priest *when meeting him* and *take their final leave* after a visit. It is especially good to teach children to ask for a blessing, as a way of involving them in the life of the Church and getting them to know the priest as their friend.

11) “What about making prostrations?”

By “prostration”, we mean here falling to one's knees and touching the head to the ground and then rising up again. This has been a sign of humility before God and men from time immemorial. Jacob prostrated himself before Esau seven times to show his humility (Gen. 33:3) and this has always been *the*

classic Middle-eastern way of acknowledging another's greatness or to show sorrow for one's sin. Small wonder it remains in the worship of the *Eastern Orthodox Church*!

The believer may make a prostration any time to show submission to God and to express sorrow for sin. However, there are times in the Church Year when joy is the dominant key-note and liturgical expression of sorrow is out of place. Thus the Church, in her canons, **forbids making prostrations at Pascha** and throughout the Paschal season (i.e. until Ascension). Also, because each Sunday is a "little Pascha", we are not normally to prostrate **on Sundays** either. (We may, however, make a deep bow from the waist—such as we do at the "epiclesis" or invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the Bread and Wine in the Liturgy.)

There are, however, certain times in our services where **prostrations are especially appropriate** and are, in fact, **required**.

On *weekday Liturgies*, after the "epiclesis" (mentioned above), because the Holy Spirit comes down on us and upon the Gifts of Bread and Wine to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ, we make a prostration, acknowledging thereby the Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist.

During *services of the Cross*, (such as the September 14 Feast of the Elevation, the Third Sunday in Lent and on August 1), the Cross, decorated with flowers, is brought into the midst of the church. After it is placed in the center, we sing the hymn "Before Your Cross, we bow down in worship" and make a triple prostration as we kiss the precious Cross.

At the conclusion of "Forgiveness Sunday Vespers", at *the Ceremony of Mutual Forgiveness*, we kiss the Cross displayed in the church and then prostrate to each other, beginning with the priest. We prostrate to each of our neighbours in turn and ask forgiveness, saying "Forgive me, brother! (or sister) and then exchange the Kiss of Peace. In this way, we begin Great Lent by humbling ourselves and making peace with all men.

In Great Lent (when not a Sunday), we make prostrations during *the Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian*. This is a beautiful prayer, ascribed to one of the Church's great poets. We pray as follows: "O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of laziness, despair, lust of power and idle talk!" (We then make a prostration). "But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Your servant!" (second prostration) "Yes, O Lord and King! Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother!" (third prostration). We then says twelve times "O God, cleanse me a sinner!" and bow from the waist. Finally, we recite the entire prayer all the way through a second time, with a final prostration at the end.

This *Prayer of St. Ephraim* is also used twice in the Lenten "*Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts*", but it is used there without the twelve-fold "O God, cleanse me a sinner!" and without the final and second repetition.

Also in the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts*, we prostrate ourselves when the priest elevates the candle and chants "Wisdom! Let us attend! *The Light of Christ illumines all!*" We do so again *throughout the Great Entrance*. At the Great Entrance in the "normal" Divine Liturgy, (while we sing the hymn "Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim"), we of course do not prostrate ourselves, for what is entering our midst is mere Bread and Wine, to be offered at the altar. But at the Presanctified Liturgy, (while we sing the hymn "Now the Powers of heaven with us do serve"), what is brought in is the Presanctified and true Body and Blood of Christ, sanctified on the previous Sunday and reserved until then. That is why we prostrate ourselves as it enters our midst, for It is the true Christ in our midst.

12) "Why are different colours used in church?"

The present **scheme of liturgical colours** which enrich our services is relatively recent. The old "Typicon", (the book which gives directions about how the services are to be done), does not mention all the colours used nowadays. Rather, it speaks only of "bright" colours for Pascha and other such joyful times and of "dark" colours, for more sombre times, such as Great Lent.

Nonetheless, it has become customary to use certain colours at certain times. The actual scheme for *which* colours to use *when* varies from place to place. But the following is commonly seen.

Gold is the main liturgical colour for most Sundays. It speaks to us of the preciousness of God's Kingdom.

White is often used for Pascha and for Christmas. It speaks of the purity and joy of Christ. (For this reason, it is also the colour used for funerals, since Christian funerals are occasions for joy, not sorrow, as the Christian, upon dying, goes to the blissful happiness of the Kingdom.)

Blue is used for feasts of the Mother of God. Blue is the colour of the heavens and we believe that the boundless God, dwelling in the womb of Mary, "made her womb more spacious than the heavens". Therefore we use blue to remind us of Mary and the Incarnation.

Purple (or perhaps black) is used for Great Lent and Holy Week, since it is a sombre colour that speaks of our sorrow for sin.

Green is used for Pentecost (when the church temple is also decorated with greenery). This is because Pentecost is the feast of our life in the Spirit and green symbolizes life and growth.

Red is used for feasts of martyrs and saints, since it is the colour of the blood of martyrdom and of the fire of the Spirit.

Not all churches use all these colours. This is a matter which differs from place to place, according to desire (and availability of funds!) It is not a "capital-T" tradition. But, since we human beings use colours to enrich and beautify the things we love, it is only natural to use them as well in the worship of God. It is one more way to offer the best we have to the Lord.

13) "How do I say prayers at home?"

One should say one's personal set Rule of Prayer morning and evening. (The priest can help determine a proper and appropriate Rule.) Ideally, they should be said at the same time every day and before the family Icon Corner.

The **family Icon Corner** can be in any part of the house in which we live, but it is usually found in the living room, facing (if possible) East. (Indeed, according to unwritten Apostolic tradition, *all* prayers should be said facing East.)

The Icon Corner may be simple or elaborate, according to taste and personal means. It may have many icons or few, arranged in whatever way suits the size and arrangement of the room. It may be in an actual corner or on a flat wall surface. It usually has at least one lamp burning before it, either a candle in a stand or from a hanging lamp. Very often, the Prayerbook, devotional books, incense-burner and supply of Holy Water are stored there, close at hand. One may burn incense in a little incense burner at the beginning of one's prayer time, if so desired. (One pious custom is to take the portable incense burner—they come equipped with handles—throughout the house, censuring the entire dwelling, while singing Tropars or other hymns of the Church.)

In saying one's **personal daily Rule of Prayer**, one should always take time to "center down" and be at peace before beginning, blessing oneself with the Sign of the Cross. Prayers are to be said slowly and aloud, attending to their meaning and offering them up reverently. Sometimes, we may make bows or prostrations along with our prayers (especially in Great Lent). After the appointed prayers from the Prayerbook, one should pray as well in one's own words, conversing with the Lord. The Scriptures also should be read, perhaps the Epistle and Gospel for the day (from the church calendar), or a psalm. One concludes the time of prayer by again making the Sign of the Cross.

As well as one's private twice-a-day Rule, the Orthodox family will also have **corporate family prayers**, similar to the above format. It is good to include children in this, though one may wish to adapt the length of the family prayers with the children in mind. In these family prayers especially it is good to

sing Tropars and other hymns, so that there is a link between what is sung in Church and the life of the home.

14) “May I bring things to church to be blessed?”

Yes! It is the custom of the Church to bless all things, since the Church is the transfigured cosmos, mystically present even now in this age. Thus the Church blesses rivers, lakes, water (at Theophany). It blesses incense before using it in the services and Church vestments before they are worn. For, according to the prayer the Church prays (as it blesses the Loaves, Wheat, Wine and Oil at the Litya service at Vigil), “You bless and sanctify all things, O Christ our God!” Thus it is quite acceptable and desirable to bring things to church to be blessed by the priest.

The normal time for this would be in connection with the Divine Liturgy, when the Church blesses and sanctifies Bread and Wine and offers the whole cosmos back to God. What is offered should be given to the priest before the service, so that he may place it on the altar. It is usually blessed at the conclusion of the service and then returned to its owner.

What is usually brought to be blessed? **Icons** for the home “icon corner” are brought (the Greek custom is to leave them on the altar for a number of days; the Slavic custom is to bless them with prayer immediately that day). Some bring their **Prayerbooks** and **prayer-ropes** or the small **cross** worn on the breast. Some bring **the Scriptures** to be blessed. In theory, anything may be offered to God for reverent use, but it is customary to bring only those things which have a “religious” function. (School text-books and secular jewellery are not usually brought!)

Also, it is customary to bring certain things on certain Feast days. **Candles** are brought on the February 2 Feast of the Meeting; **grapes and fruit** on the August 6 Feast of Transfiguration; and **flowers** on the August 15 Feast of the Dormition.

Further, it is usual to ask the priest come to **bless one’s home** sometime during the Theophany season beginning January 6. This is a wonderful brief service that should not be omitted. The priest may only be there for a short visit, but the blessing lingers throughout the rest of the year! (At St. Herman’s, the faithful are urged to call the priest to schedule their visit.)

Other things may also be blessed by the priest. Newly-acquired **cars** are sometimes blessed—as well as bee-hives and cattle! (A remnant of a more rural past.)

These rites of blessing are not a form of “magic”. Rather, they are acts of faith and dedication to the Lord. They are one more way we offer ourselves and all the varied parts of our lives to Him, to be used for His glory.

15) “When should I call the priest to come and visit?”

One may call the priest anytime and as often as one wishes, since the parish priest is one’s spiritual father, confessor and friend, the shepherd who must answer for the souls of his flock on the Last Day (Hebrews 13:17). You should therefore get to know each other very well!

But as well, there are other **special times** when it is customary to ask the priest to come and pray for you. The priest is usually called after *the birth of a child*, to invoke God’s blessing as soon as the child is born. He also comes on the 8th day after the birth when the child receives his (or her) name. (Note: after the birth of a child, the new mother enjoys a 40-day “retreat” at home, when she may “opt out” of the hustle and bustle of life and enjoy a time of relaxation and bonding with her new-born child. Her liturgical return to church and to Holy Communion after this is marked by special prayers of blessing.)

The priest is to be called when one moves into a *new house*, to ask God’s blessing on the dwelling and the new life lived there. (As well, it is customary for the priest to visit each house in the parish every year in the weeks following the Feast of Theophany on January 6.)

The priest is also to be called when one is *ill*, to anoint and pray for healing.

As well, a special prayer-service (called a “Molieben” or “supplication”) may be offered on *other special occasions* such as before travelling, or the beginning of a school year, or the New Year, or at special anniversaries.

16) “What about other occasions, like weddings and funerals?”

The Orthodox way is to offer *all* of one’s life to Christ our God and this includes of course such joyful times as weddings and such sorrowful times as funerals.

Weddings are performed for the Orthodox faithful as the way to sanctify and bless the future married life of the couple, making their union an image and reflection of the union between Christ and His Church and their marriage a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. (Which is why the Marriage Service begins with the exclamation “Blessed is the Kingdom...” rather than the usual “Blessed is our God...”) It presupposes an Orthodox couple and that their life will be lived together within their parish church. For this reason, the priest may not marry people who are not Orthodox—though “by economy”, he may bless a “mixed marriage”, where only one of the partners is an Orthodox Christian, (as long as the non-Orthodox partner is at least a baptized Christian). A marriage between an Orthodox and a non-Christian is not possible in the Orthodox Church. Also, if one of the partners has been divorced or widowed, the blessing of the Bishop for the proposed marriage must be sought and obtained well in advance.

There are certain times when *marriages may not be performed*: times of fasting and penitence, when we are thinking of our sins and so the joy of marriage is clearly out of place, such as (for example), Saturday evenings, the four fasting seasons of the Church Year, and the Feasts of the Beheading of St. John the Baptizer on August 29 and the Elevation of the Holy Cross on September 14. Marriages also may not be performed during times of special festal joy, when our hearts are focused exclusively on the Lord: times such as the Twelve Great Feasts and their eves, the Christmas season of December 25 to January, Bright Week, following Pascha. That is a lot of exclusions! To be safe and sure, one should consult the priest before setting the actual date!

As for the Wedding itself, one should be aware that Orthodox weddings are not like on T.V.! There is no procession of the bride down the central aisle, no father “giving her away”, no exchange of vows, no multitude of Best Man, Maid of Honour, Ushers, etc., etc. Rather, there are only two sponsors—one for the Groom, and one for the Bride, and both must be adult communicant Orthodox Christians. Rings are exchanged (without vows) at the betrothal and crowns are placed on the bride and groom in the Marriage Service proper. (The Russian tradition is to use golden crowns provided by the Church; the Greek custom is for the bride and groom to provide their own floral crowns, which they then keep as mementos of their wedding. These can be made by any florist.) Since Marriage is a sacrament of the Church, “joint-celebration” in the wedding itself, (involving the liturgical involvement of non-Orthodox), is not possible. Also, any personalization of the Service, (such as Uncle Angus playing the bag-pipes, Aunt Flora singing “The Rose” or the six-year old niece being “Flower Girl”) is out of place—as it is at *any* Orthodox service. With but a little creativity, however, a place can be found for such things at the Reception following.

There are also certain customs surrounding the more sorrowful rites of dying and the subsequent **funeral**. When it seems that a loved one is about to die, the priest should be called to say the *final prayers* and to give the dying his last Holy Communion.

After the death as occurred, it is customary to serve a memorial service (or “Panikhida”) for his repose on the eve of the day of funeral. On the day of the funeral itself, the departed is brought into the Church for the Funeral Service (assuming the departed was an Orthodox; otherwise, it would be more appropriate to have the service at the Funeral Home.)

There are certain *characteristics of Orthodox Funerals* which may not be encountered elsewhere and one should be prepared for this. The departed lies in an open casket throughout the Service, usually holding an icon in the hand. The faithful may come at the conclusion of the Service to give him (or her) the Last Kiss of final farewell. It is assumed that cremation, (since it is generally forbidden to Orthodox, out of respect for the sanctity of human flesh), will not follow the funeral, but that the dead will be reverently buried. Once again, since it is one of the Rites of the Church, no ecumenical liturgical joint-celebration in the Service itself is possible.

After the death of a loved one, it is customary to remember them in prayer—not only in one’s regular prayers and in the Divine Liturgy, but also by having special Memorial Services for them as desired. This Service (the “*Panikhida*”) is especially to be served on the 3rd, 9th, and 40th day after their death and every year on the anniversary, but it can also be held mostly any other time as well. Saturday is the most appropriate day of the week for the Memorial Service, since it is the day when the Saviour Himself rested in the tomb. It is a pious custom to bring to this Service a dish of boiled wheat (sweetened with a topping of sugar in the form of a Cross), called “*kolyva*”, which is shared afterwards as part of a memorial meal.

There are also certain days when Memorials are particularly fitting—days such as the Saturdays of Great Lent (so-called “Soul Saturdays”). The priest will have the complete list of these days, as well as times when a Panikhida may not be served (such as the Christmas season and Holy Week and Bright Week).

The funeral rites of the Church are full of comfort and assurance. The Orthodox Church has never believed in Purgatory, as the medieval Roman Catholic church. Rather, in its prayers for the faithful departed, the Orthodox Church commends her children into the hands of a loving Saviour, “where sickness and sorrow are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting” (Kontakion for the Departed).

A Final Apostolic Directive:

“Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the Church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”

--1 Corinthians 10:31-33

