

Some Thoughts on Church Etiquette and Movement in Church

By Fr. Milton Gianulis, Presiding Priest

One of the joys of being an Orthodox Church in America is that the parishioners are from different backgrounds. We are a Greek Orthodox Church, but have a good variety of Russians, Romanians, Greeks, and others, not to mention so-called converts. The Church is open to all.

There are, however, differing traditions within One Holy Orthodox Church and Tradition. There are essentially two liturgical traditions, either the Slavonic or the Greek *typikon* (rubrics). Some things may just be custom. For example, in the Slavonic tradition, it might be customary to stand during the reading of the epistle. Not so in the Greek tradition. One thing that is common to all Orthodox, though, is standing during prayers.

I have been asked: why is it necessary to stand during prayer? Could we not sit? We could, but it is too casual and consequently makes it too easy to be distracted. Note that a Traditional Orthodox Church had no pews. They evolved as an accommodation for cultural sensibilities, or perhaps due to an influence of a Protestant culture in America. So, we do have pews and can sit for parts of the service, but as Orthodox we typically find ourselves either standing or kneeling during our prayers in Church. Why?

Well, I suppose we could not say that one certainly can pray while sitting. St. Paul challenges us to “pray unceasingly,” which would include sitting. However, that has to do with our personal, or private prayer life. During corporate prayer, like the Divine Liturgy, i.e., in Church, we stand. Standing is a liturgical posture in which we show respect for God. Kneeling is done to show humility before God. We should not be too casual and relaxed. We really ought not to cross our legs because it is in many cultures a sign of disrespect—it is too casual. Standing shows respect for Him Whom we worship and helps keep our focus on the liturgy.

There are other liturgical gestures and postures are utilized in Orthodox worship because praying is not merely a cerebral or mental action; we are not merely listening and contemplating. We are engaged in actively worshipping God. We use our whole body, our entire being in our worship.

We move freely. We venerate icons. We prostrate, stand, kneel, bow, sign the cross, etc. We get involved in the liturgy. In fact, all five senses are utilized in worship, or at least should be.

We smell the sweet fragrance of the incense, which fills the air symbolic of the Holy Spirit among us. We taste the bread and wine when we partake of Holy Communion, or the boiled wheat and sweetness of the *koliva* at memorial services, and so forth. We use the sense of touch or feel when we kiss an icon, or touch the hem of the priest's robe, or kiss his hand. We see the beautifully adorned sanctuary filled with icons, each strategically placed to tell a story of the life of Christ and His Church (and to help us focus when we do get distracted). And we hear the melodic hymnology, each hymn in itself a doctrinal statement and prayer.

Our whole being worships. We are not casual observers of a play or show as if we were there to be entertained. Church is not about our comfort level. Church is the house of worship in which all our attention should be focused on God, but we should not be restricted to sitting in one place. We should feel free to stand, move about, come up to the iconostas (icon screen) and venerate an icon, light a candle, make a prostration (metania), and so forth. Of course, we should not be moving about during the readings of scripture, blessings by the priest, or during a prayer; but we can move about somewhat freely.

We worship Him, not merely receive inspiration from the message of the minister. This is something that cannot be passive. This cannot be done at home or alone. Worship is corporate and our prayer posture is an aid to our being involved.