

WORSHIPPING IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD



How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes it faints for the courts of the Lord: my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God!" (Psalm 83:2-3, LXX)

For Old Testament Jews the temple at Jerusalem, about which the above words were written, signaled the special relationship they had with God. The Lord, the only true God, had chosen them as His people and dwelt in their midst in this temple.

For Christians the dwelling place of God is not a building. Rather it is the people of God itself, the Church community, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the church building represents and makes visible for us this relationship we have with God. The design and iconography of the Byzantine church building in particular strives to represent in a visible way this relationship from God's side, as it were. Surrounded by the saints (represented on the walls), under the headship of Christ (represented in the dome) and by virtue of His incarnation (represented by the icon screen), we have been brought to stand before the throne of God (represented by the Holy Table) to receive a share in His life.

Just as the design of the Church building recalls what God has done to bring us to intimacy with Him, what we do in that building signifies our side of the relationship. By our worship in the church we recognize God's saving and forgiving love for us. We acknowledge that we owe Him our very lives and that we belong fully to Him, that it is to Him that we "commend ourselves, one another and our whole life".

In the original Greek of the New Testament the word worship is *proskineo*, which means 'to bow in respect or submission'. It is a physical action, drawn from the ceremonial of royal courts, meant to express the attitude of our hearts before the King of all. This connection has been maintained in the Eastern Churches where **to worship still means to bow down before the Lord**. This bow has been made a specifically Christian action in Byzantine practice by joining to it the sign of the cross. This action, a deep bow coupled with the sign of the cross, is the distinctive action of Byzantine worship which we call **the metany**. Used continually in both private and liturgical worship, it expresses our dependence upon God's saving love and our confident assurance that He continually bestows it.

In Byzantine practice worship is not a matter of watching someone else reverence God, but of actually doing it ourselves. Eastern Christians traditionally express their relationship with God by performing the metany and other gestures of worship whenever they pray at home or in the church building. Since these gestures are not common in Western religious or secular culture, the following guide is offered. It is not meant to straightjacket your piety, but rather to enable you to enter fully into our Eastern experience of the worship of the Lord.

In making a metany, bow from the waist while extending your right hand until your fingertips touch the ground; then rise and make the sign of the cross, saying the prayer "O God, be gracious to me, a sinner".

ENTERING THE CHURCH



We generally enter the church through the narthex or vestibule, the place of preparation, then proceed into the nave. In many churches the narthex contains one or more tables where candles may be obtained and the offerings collected. In addition to monetary offerings, it is customary in many places for people to offer the consumables used in the divine services: holy bread, wine, oil or incense.

It is also the practice in some churches to record prayer intentions at a table in the narthex. People write the names of those for whom they wish prayer in a book or on pieces of paper which are given to the priest for mention in the service. In some churches people may obtain altar bread in the narthex and offer it along with their prayer intentions as well.

In most churches one or more icons are placed in the narthex, at the door of the nave, or in the middle of the church for veneration. **The most customary manner of reverencing an icon** is as follows: make one or two metanies then kiss the icon and then make a final metany, place your candle in the stand and move away. It is the custom in many places to kiss the feet on an icon of Christ, the hands on an icon of the Theotokos, and the forehead on the icon of a saint.

It is customary to **make three metanies on first entering the nave of the church** to reverence the presence of God before venerating other icons or going to your place.

Whether or not a service is in progress, **refrain from all unnecessary conversation in the nave of the church**. People who come early to church generally do so for moments of spiritual preparation. If you wish to hold a conversation with someone before the service, please go to the narthex, the hall, or outside to do it.

DURING THE SERVICE



If all the prayer gestures used in Byzantine worship, the most frequently employed is **the sign of the cross**. The customary times of its use in our prayer are:

- The opening doxology of any prayer or service;
- Whenever the Holy Trinity is glorified by name;
- Whenever we are blessed by a sacred object, such as the cross, the Holy Gospel, the chalice or an icon;
- Whenever any of these sacred objects is carried before us in procession;
- In some churches, whenever we are blessed or incensed;
- In some churches, whenever we wish to intensify our prayer by an expression of personal fervor (e.g., when saying "I believe..." or personalizing the petition of a litany).
- At the Divine Liturgy, after the words of Christ ("Take, eat... take, drink ...") are said.

Besides its use on first entering the church, **the metany is also frequently employed** in worship, as follows:

- Whenever invited to by the clergy (e.g., "Come let us worship and bow down ...");
- Each time the trisagion ("Holy God, holy mighty One...") is said;
- After the reading of psalms, at the words "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia: glory to You, O God!";
- Whenever we approach to receive Communion, or to receive or venerate a sacred object.
- After the epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit) at the Divine Liturgy

Another gesture frequently employed is praying with raised hands. Often mentioned in Scripture, this has remained the most characteristic prayer posture in all religions of the Middle East. It is most generally used in our Church's worship whenever the Lord's Prayer is recited. At the Divine Liturgy in some churches people also raise their hands at the words "We lift them up to the Lord" before the anaphora.

Entrances or processions are frequently held in Byzantine worship, bringing the Gospel Book, the holy gifts, or icons into the midst of the congregation. As mentioned above, it is customary to make the sign of the cross when these objects are carried past us. In some places people may reach out and touch the object or the garment of the priest carrying it as well. It is generally the custom to turn and face the procession as it passes, so as not to turn our backs on the liturgical rite.

Frequently whenever the Holy Gospel is read, some worshippers will come forward to stand **under the sacred book** as a sign of devotion. In some churches the Gospel Book is presented to these people for veneration after the reading.

RECEIVING COMMUNION

It is folly not to approach Holy Communion with great awe, purified by prayer and fasting according to our ability (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26-31).

At the time of Communion, **we come forward with the right hand crossed over the left** and held to the breast. While the person in front of you is communicating, make one or two metanias. If the priest does not know you by name, mention it as you approach so that he can repeat it in the Communion formula. Then open your mouth widely and do not attempt to say anything else (amen, thank you, etc.) while the priest administers the holy mysteries to you.

In the Melkite Church Communion is generally given by intinction: the holy bread is dipped into the chalice and placed in your mouth. **The mouth must be fully open**; the tongue may be extended or not. Most Byzantine Churches administer Communion with a spoon. When receiving in this manner, the tongue should not be extended, nor should the communicant close his mouth until the spoon has been removed.

If the priest is carrying a communion cloth, wipe your lips with it after communicating, then step aside and again make a metany before going back to your place.

AFTER THE SERVICE

At the end of the Divine Liturgy it is customary for the priest to distribute the remainder of the holy bread which had not been consecrated. This bread, called *antidoron*, may be consumed at this time or taken home to be eaten during one's private prayers or shared with a family member unable to come to church. It becomes a way of expressing our unity with the worshipping community even when we cannot attend the Liturgy.

After other services and, in some churches after the Liturgy as well, the holy cross or an icon may be presented for veneration. In either case, approach the priest, make one or two metanias, venerate the cross and/or receive the antidoron, and kiss the hand of the priest who gives it. Then step aside, make another metany and depart.

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