

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

**LEAFLETS IN THIS INTRODUCTION TO  
ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY SERIES:**

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WHEN WE COME TO CHURCH  
WORLDWIDE FAMILY

All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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**"The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from  
"Encountering the Mystery."  
ISBN 978-0-385-51813-0*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael  
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

In the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain.  
Exarchate of Western Europe and Ireland.  
[www.thyateira.org.uk](http://www.thyateira.org.uk)

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Οικουμενικόν Πατριαρχεῖον.  
[www.ec-patr.org](http://www.ec-patr.org)



Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.03.17

# Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: When we come to church.



Church of the Holy Fathers of Nicaea and  
St. John the Baptist, Shrewsbury.

**"You have taken so much trouble to come here, and on such a cold day! And you are standing! Yours efforts should not be wasted. And so let us ask the Spirit of God that not a single, unclear thought remain within us. We shouldn't leave church if our hearts haven't worshipped God, if we don't feel that our souls have been thrust into heaven, if we have not seen all that happens here."**

(A brief paragraph from a sermon by Archimandrite Aimilianos, formerly abbot of Meteora and Monastery of Simonopetra on Mount Athos. The sermon is entitled: *The Divine Liturgy: the Window of Heaven*. The full text of this and others are in: *The Church at Prayer: the Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*. Published by the Holy Convent of the Annunciation, Ormylia, Halkidiki, Greece. ISBN 960-518-251-3)

When we enter an Orthodox temple (church) we are entering somewhere very special, a sacred space. It is a place where we should feel at home with God and our fellow Orthodox Christians of all ages. It is here that we pray to God, worship him and feel his presence, especially when we celebrate the holy mysteries (sacraments), above all the Divine Liturgy.

On entering a temple of Orthodoxy and/or grounds in which it stands, we make the sign of the cross and a small bow to acknowledge we are entering a sacred place.

Going to where we can buy candles, we buy those we need. Approaching the icon(s) we venerate (kiss) them, light our candles and place them on the stand close by, remembering those who have asked us to pray for them and those for whom we wish to pray.



We might also approach the iconostasis. First before the icon of the Saviour, making two metanias (deep bows - some touch the ground with their hand), each time making the sign of the cross, kiss the icon, then a third metania and sign of the cross. The same for the icon of the Theotokos (Mother of God) and any others.

We now take our place remembering that we may stand anywhere in the Nave – the main part of the church reserved for the laity. Seats are for those who need them but we mostly stand throughout services. It often surprises visitors how this freedom of space affects the whole feel of worship.

Worship is an important work (liturgy – Greek *λειτουργία* – work of the people) and although we come as individuals we meet in community, having consideration for the action of the service and for our fellow worshippers.

**Services have a beginning and an end.** We should arrive in time but sometimes for good reason we may be late. Although it really applies to the whole service one special thing to remember is that if we arrive when the New Testament readings are about to be or are being read and during the sermon we should stand quietly and attentively until they end, not causing any distraction, and before lighting our candles.

Except for special reason or circumstance, adults would not expect to receive the Holy Gifts (Holy Communion) if arriving after the Gospel reading. Children, who are late, usually because brought late by parents, may receive the Holy Gifts but should be taught that the entire Liturgy from the opening doxology to the final blessing is a complete act of worship.

Priest and deacon intone petitions, prayers and dialogues with the appropriate responses being made. Choirs, singers, readers and servers have their special allotted parts and although there are sections reserved for the reader and singers everyone may harmoniously join in others but none should 'dominate'. Whilst congregational participation is preferred, in some places choir or chanter(s) will be the sole singers.

As well as the invitation: "*Let us pray to the Lord*", we hear "*Let us attend*", "*Let us bow our heads to the Lord*", and others. These are not mere ritual formality but invitation to be united in the offered prayers, attentive to word and action, by small physical acts expressing our individual participation and reverence.

Our various Orthodox jurisdictions, local custom and individual devotion, mean that although we see familiar ways of doing things we will also see slightly different ones. We should not be unduly concerned about this.

Differences in customs can be seen for instance in the manner of approaching and receiving the Holy Gifts. In Greek tradition Churches one approaches the priest usually with arms held loosely to the sides, receives the Holy Gifts, then takes a portion of \*blessed but not consecrated bread. The cup – (poteirion or chalice) is not kissed. No actions before or after should detract from the act of Holy Communion. In the Russian tradition the arms are crossed on the chest and after receiving the Holy Gifts the base of the cup is kissed, bread and warm wine/water then being taken. In neither tradition is the sign of the cross made before or after receiving the Holy Gifts. It is worth mentioning here that only members of the Orthodox Church may receive Holy Communion.

After the Dismissal at the end of Divine Liturgy in the Churches of the Greek tradition all present may receive a small piece of blessed but unconsecrated bread called \*Antidoron ("instead of the gifts") and words of blessing from the priest.

Each person will develop their own devotional pattern, learning from others and in turn setting example. The clergy have guidance from rubrics (instructions usually printed in red in service books). Singers have various books including their particular rubrics to follow. Members of the congregation will by frequent attendance come to know the services well, particularly those parts which are frequently repeated. Children will learn in the same way, being taught by parents, other family members and godparents.

**"We find ourselves in church. As we've said, it is the most suitable place from which to look at heaven. But where is the window? How do we open it? The answer is simple. The window is the Divine Liturgy which we are celebrating. We aim to turn our eyes toward spiritual things. Let us therefore turn our soul to the Holy Spirit, and let us ask him to shine his light on the darkness of our thoughts. When he does, we will be able to feel, to believe, to understand, and make our own, everything which is said and done during the Divine Liturgy."**

(See Elder Aimilianos on this leaflet front).