

Freedom and Discipline in Orthodox Worship

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When coming first to an Orthodox service, people are often attracted by the freedom and spontaneity of our behaviour in church. There is no uniformity in devotional attitudes; there are no rows of pews or benches; children roam around and feel at home. But as soon as one begins to grasp the inner meaning of the services and delves deeper into Orthodox spirituality, one discovers that this freedom is based on the knowledge of a system of rules developed through centuries, and so one discovers one of those antinomies which underlie our faith. Indeed, the concept of antinomy or coexistence of seeming opposites, is indispensable to the right understanding of any aspect of Orthodoxy. Such is the case with the freedom of our worship.

The freedom we all desire is the very foundation of Orthodox spirituality. The first care of Mother Church is that her children should feel at home, confident and inwardly convinced of the usefulness and meaning of every action and gesture. Nothing is imposed from without. Yet this situation places our congregation at risk, people can make mistakes, and by making them, disturb others. Our church is indeed a school of patience and tolerance.

Freedom? - Yes, but what kind of freedom? One is bound to discover that the freedom of behaviour at Orthodox services is not a freedom of personal improvisation or conjecture, but stems from an appreciation of tradition with its wisdom, its emphasis on sobriety, its warnings against psychological exaltation or imagination.

Orthodoxy attaches great importance to the material manifestation of the spirit, and therefore to the part our body plays in our worship. Every gesture, every word becomes meaningful and symbolic. Yet Orthodoxy, with its great respect for the freedom of the individual expression of prayer, prefers no expression at all, if not moved by spirit. A comparison with iconography will perhaps make this clearer: the icon painter must die as an artist and obey the canon of iconographic rules, yet through this very obedience comes, paradoxically, the gift of creative freedom.

How we should behave in church, then, is sacred: it is the 'House of God'. Whether we enter it to attend the service, or whether at other times we come to pray or to clean, we must comport ourselves with reverence. We should not sit with crossed legs (as if in a sitting room), nor stand or walk about with

our hands in our pockets or behind our back. No one unauthorised (man or woman) should enter the sanctuary. Only the priest or the deacon can tread in the space between the royal doors of the iconostasis and the Holy Table, all others must walk behind the Holy Table. Only the priest, deacon or subdeacon can touch the Holy Table or pick up anything placed upon it. Lay people likewise should not touch the table of preparation, or the holy vessels placed upon it.

For behaviour during the services I would suggest three main guidelines:

1. In church we are in the very presence of God
2. During the services we are concelebrants with the clergy.
3. We must respect the local customs of the particular community we join.

We should make a serious effort to come to church before the beginning of the service, so that we have time for our personal devotions, time to venerate the icons, light candles, hand in the *prosphoras*.ⁱ At a recent conference, where there was no reason for most people not to be well in time for the services, one could see a striking example of disregarding the primacy of 'concelebration', when those who were late formed a long queue to kiss the icon, upsetting the service, the censuring by the deacon and even the Little Entrance.ⁱⁱ

On entering the church it is good to stop a moment make a sign of the cross once or three times, perhaps bow to people who are there. After venerating the icons (if desired), choose the place where to stand at the back. It requires certain boldness to stand well forward when the church is not very full, but we, sinners as we are, also are sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven, and it is good to fill the whole space of the church. In taking one's place in front of those who are already there one must be careful not to crowd them, but to leave them sufficient space to pray. Unless one is commissioned to look after the candles and lamps or to help in some other way in the service, there is no reason to change one's place, except to sit down.

Small children, however, cannot be expected to remain with profit for the whole of the long service. They can be brought in and taken to kiss the icons at a later moment in the service.

If we are unfortunate enough to be late, proceeding with our personal devotions in front of icons during the service may be tolerated, but must be done with discretion at the 'lesser' moments of the service and on no account during the more important parts such as:

- The Opening Blessing.
- The singing of the Beatitudes.

- The Little Entrance.
- The Trisagion: 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.'
- The reading of the Gospel.
- The sermon.
- The singing of the Cherubic Hymn (one should not kneel during it, as we are inwardly concelebrating at that time with the angels).
- The Great Entrance.
- The recitation or singing of the Lord's Prayer.
- The Communion of the clergy and then of the people.
- The blessing with the Chalice.

The moment the service starts, we the laity, as concelebrants with the clergy, must concentrate entirely on every word and action performed by the priest, deacon, the readers and the choir, joining them inwardly and responding by certain gestures, movements and words. Concerning all these a complete analysis is outside the scope of this essay, but a brief outline may be useful.

Standing and sitting

The traditional position in prayer for the Orthodox – especially during the Eucharist – is standing. The ability to stand comfortably for a long time requires practice. When one has found the best way of balancing one's weight, it becomes effortless. Also the more one is involved in following the less one is aware of physical fatigue. Still, if one becomes tired it is better to sit and pray than to stand and think of one's feet. Naturally, one should still try to get up for the more solemn moments of the service. However, no one will mind if a person who is incapacitated is obliged to sit down all the time.

There are times during Orthodox services when most people sit. These are: during the readings from the Old Testament, or when listening to a sermon, or the special parts of the offices when *kathismata* (appointed portions of the Psalter recited while the congregation is seated) are read or sung etc. Many people sit during the reading of the Epistle but, although the deacon afterwards invites everybody to stand up to listen to the Gospel, strictly speaking it is the priest alone who is supposed to sit during the Epistle.

Bowing, kneeling and prostration

As bodily expressions of our prayer, these are used in Orthodoxy with a precise meaning. The extent of their use varies from person to person and from one Orthodox country to another. Bowing often accompanies the sign of the Cross, but we incline our heads without the sign of the Cross in response to a blessing, either verbal, as for instance in reply to this unique eucharistic blessing:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,

or when the priest blesses us with the sign of the Cross or when the priest or the deacon censes us. When the priest blesses us with the altar cross or chalice, however, we both bow and cross ourselves.

Kneeling has always been part of the Orthodox tradition. This is attested, for instance, by the 'kneeling prayers' at the Vespers of Pentecost. We often kneel when we are receiving the absolution of our sins in Confession.

Prostration is a characteristic expression of Orthodox devotion. There is an abbreviated form of prostration, when we touch the ground with our hand in a deep bowing movement, and a full prostration down to the ground, the head touching the floor, followed by immediate rising, all in one movement.

Both kneeling and prostrations are either signs of deep veneration, as when we prostrate ourselves at the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*), or when the risen Christ come to us in the chalice at communion, or in an act of penitence. As such they are normally reserved for weekday services, and especially for Lent. One is not supposed to kneel or prostrate at the Sunday services, Sunday being the festive day of Resurrection. Nor do we kneel at any of the greater Feasts of the Church and especially during the periods from Christmas to Theophany, and above all from Easter to Pentecost. But when, as may happen in a parish church, Sunday is the only day of the week on which services are held, kneeling and prostration are widely tolerated, except during the fifty days after Easter.

The movement of full prostration, followed by an immediate return to the standing position, teaches us humility, a dying with Christ so as to join Him in His Resurrection. For those Orthodox who have lost the custom of prostration (such as, for instance, the prostrations after each petition of the moving Lenten prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian)ⁱⁱⁱ a whole dimension of Lenten experience is missing.

At some specially important moments of the Eucharist – and very often in Lent, when we are even commanded by the priest to fall down – the prostration is longer. Lying down with our face to earth helps us to free ourselves from all that is unimportant, and reminds us that we are created from 'dust', utterly dependant upon God.

The sign of the Cross

Making the sign of the Cross is a confession of our faith in the Holy Trinity, a seal of the saving power of the Cross; it is an intensified prayer. We make it with our thumb and first two fingers joined together: on the forehead, on the

chest, on the right shoulder and on the left shoulder, some saying inwardly: 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen', or another Trinitarian doxology.

One should make the sign of the Cross deliberately, not minimising the gesture, while standing straight. On some occasions it is followed by an inclination of the head or a deeper bow, or by a prostration, but all this only after completing the sign of the Cross (so as not to 'break' it). We make the sign of the Cross without bowing in such cases as when we are reciting the Creed, or starting the Lord's Prayer, or at the beginning of the reading of the Gospel. We accompany the sign of the Cross by a bow at the beginning of the service, every time the Holy Trinity is invoked, after the petitions of the litanies, and in other such cases.

When we come to venerate an icon or the book of the Gospels, or the Holy Cross we should at least make the sign of the Cross before kissing it, but the full order of this veneration should be, when possible, as follows: Make the sign of the Cross followed by a bow or prostration twice, kiss the icon and make the sign of the Cross once more, with a bow or prostration.

Communion

After the exclamation, 'The holy things for those who are holy', how should we prepare ourselves for communion? During the communion of the clergy in the sanctuary, the Royal Doors are closed and the veil is drawn. While the communion hymn is sung or prayers in preparation for communion are recited, the intending communicants start to move towards the chancel steps. This is the time when they can, if they wish, venerate the icons, invoking the prayers of the saints or of the Mother of God. But all this should stop as soon as the chalice is brought out, when the risen Christ is with us.

As we approach the chalice, we do not make the sign of the cross, in order to avoid the risk of upsetting it. We receive communion standing with our hands crossed on our breast. It is best to move towards the chalice in a quiet, friendly, family group, without making a queue of one line, giving precedence first to people in orders (subdeacons, readers, acolytes, nuns, monks), then to the children, the sick and elderly. Usually the concelebrant priest or the deacon assists the communicants by holding a protecting red cloth under our chin; if the priest is alone we should hold the cloth ourselves.

As we come away from the chalice (still not making the sign of the Cross) we approach a table, being careful not to form a queue, where we receive a small piece of non-consecrated bread taken from one of the prosphoras, and drink from a cup of wine mixed with warm water. This is done not only to make sure that the Holy Gifts are fully consumed, but also to help sustain communicants who have fasted some days and abstained from food and drink

before communion. Together with the non-consecrated bread of the *antidoron* (blessed bread) offered to all the people at the end of the Liturgy, and which we are glad to be able to share with other Christians present at the service, this custom is a survival of the agape which followed communion at the time of the Apostles and which symbolises the link between the Eucharist and daily life.

We do not kneel or prostrate ourselves all the day after communion, nor do we kiss the hand of the priest, as we are sanctified by the special presence of our Lord within us.

During communion all the communicants, and indeed all those present, remain in deep silence until the 'blessing with the chalice', which symbolises our Lord's Ascension. We like to congratulate each other for having taken communion, but it is better to do it after the conclusion of the service.

Rules and customs

How do we discover all these rules and how much do we keep them? There are some important ones all Orthodox observe wherever they are and one soon discovers them. The full complexity of rules is practised in Orthodox monasteries, but only rarely in parishes. But it is good to know them and to grow in understanding in their meaning.

Some customs have fallen into disuse at present in our Orthodox Churches, and one is longing for their restoration. One of them is the Kiss of Peace, which now is exchanged only by the concelebrating clergy, while the congregation is deprived of it. Yet it is a powerful manifestation of the Orthodox sense of *sobornost* and would be such a help in the preparation of the whole congregation of 'concelebrants' for the central part of the Eucharist. The Copts, Armenians and Indian Orthodox have kept it in various forms, and it is gradually being introduced into the Western liturgical practice. The Coptic Church has also preserved the custom whereby the people raise their hands in prayer when the celebrating clergy do so.

There are variations in customs from one Orthodox country to another, from one monastery to another, even from one parish to another, and from one priest's interpretation to another. We should respect the ways of the parish in which we are worshipping. But these variations do not alter the essential attitudes. Once familiar with them one should feel free to find one's own pattern within the framework of the essentials and not worry about the 'correct' observance of all the rules, giving priority to the spiritual side of one's participation in the liturgical prayer. Although we should not look at each other during services, the common prayer is felt and is a real and powerful experience.

Notes

i Prosphoras are small loaves handed in to the sanctuary by the people, with lists of names of those (living and departed) whom they wish to be commemorated by name in the Liturgy

ii Entrance into the body of the church by the clergy from the sanctuary, carrying the Gospel book.

iii The prayer of St Ephrem is used frequently in Lenten services, as follows: 'O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, despondency, lust for power and idle talk' (*prostration*). 'But give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to me thy servant' (*prostration*). 'O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother or sister: for blessed art thou to the ages of ages. Amen' (*prostration*).