

On Entering a Byzantine Church

One enters a Byzantine church through a narthex, generally adorned with icons of Old Testament saints and events. One tarries a moment to venerate the icons and to light a candle, as this area serves to allow us to leave the secular world behind before we enter the more spiritual world of the nave of the church. The nave, the physical world, is in turn separated from the altar area, Heaven, by a wall of icons, the iconostasis.

Before entering a pew, one bows reverently toward the altar, making the sign of the cross with the right hand, the thumb, index finger and middle finger joined together and the ring and little fingers folded onto the palm, proceeding from the forehead to the breast to the right shoulder to the left shoulder and then back to the breast. To kneel or genuflect is not appropriate, as this shows penance rather than respect in the Christian East.

The iconostasis, that point where Heaven and earth come together, will have large, center Royal Doors and smaller Deacon's Doors on either side. It is through these doors that the doings of Heaven and of earth mingle as the clergy bring the Gospel and the Gifts out into the people during Divine Liturgy, at the Little Entrance and Great Entrance respectively.

The Icon of the Annunciation generally adorns the Royal Doors and the Mystical Supper surmounts them. To the right will be the Icon of Christ the Teacher and to the left, the Theotokos. Further to the right will be John the Forerunner and further left the patron of this Holy Temple. Deacons or archangels will be upon the Deacon's Doors. Naught but ordained clergy pass through the Royal Doors, and they only of liturgical necessity during the worship services.

At communion time, at the invitation of the priest or deacon standing in the Royal Doors: "Approach with fear of God, with faith and with love," the people proceed reverently up the aisle with their arms crossed over their breasts. In the Melkite Church communion is given by the priest by dipping the bread into the wine rather than by the spoon used in all other Byzantine churches, because this is a more ancient Syrian custom. Communion of infants and children is the norm in Byzantine churches, as all Mysteries of Christian initiation, Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation) and Eucharist are administered together at the time of Baptism. To each communicant, the priest will say: "The servant (or handmaid) of God N. receives the precious and holy body and blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, for the remission of his (her) sins and for eternal life."

Following the dismissal at the end of Divine Liturgy, the priest distributes to each one in the church a piece of the *antidoron* or *Agape Bread*, that portion of the Holy Bread which, while blessed, had not been consecrated during the Liturgy. This is done as a sign of kinship with all people.