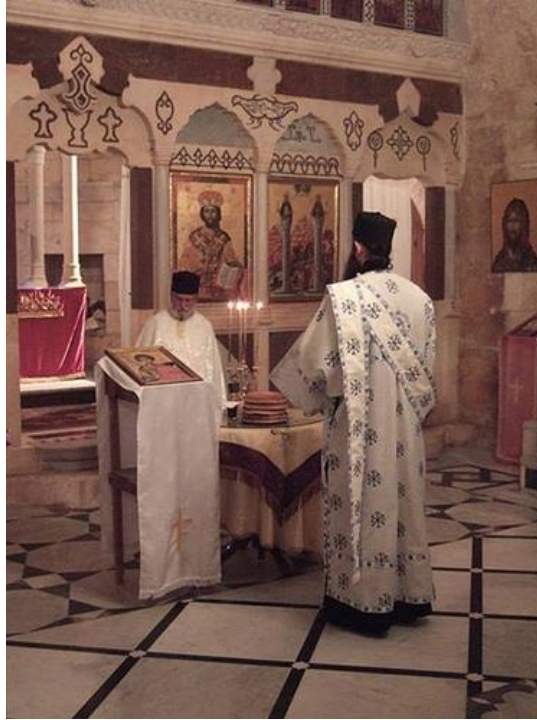


St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

Adapted from teaching materials here:

<https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/church-etiquette-ultimate-guide/>

WHEN IN CHURCH



IN AND OUT OF AN ORTHODOX CHURCH

We should never just waltz into or out of a church, blase and irreverent. Instead, we must prepare ourselves spiritually and understand what behaviour is and is not acceptable once we enter the church. Before entering the house of God, you should consider doing any or all of the following:

- Saying a prayer
- Making a bow or a metania (or a prostration in Lenten periods)
- Crossing yourself
- Lighting a candle
- Venerating the icons in the narthex and the nave

Not only should we take care in *how* we enter or exit, but also *when* we should enter or exit the church. Arriving before the service starts gives us plenty of time to say personal prayers, light candles, venerate icons, find a spot in the

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

nave, and spiritually prepare for the service. If you are a first time attender, it also gives you the opportunity to take in everything around you.

When we arrive late, we distract those around us. We also send the unconscious message – to our children, families, and friends – that church isn't that important, since we don't mind showing up late. We never go to work late. Why should we show up late to worship our God?

If you do happen to be late, enter quietly and locate the priest. Where is he? What is he doing? Generally, if the priest is standing in front of the Holy Doors in the centre of the church, you should wait until he goes back into the altar before finding your seat.

BOWS

When we normally think of bowing, we imagine a full bow at the waist, nearly ninety degrees. The Orthodox deep/profound bow used in worship only goes about forty-five degrees. We often use it together with making the sign of the cross. This type of bow is also part of making a metania, which we cover below.

While the Orthodox do use the profound bow at times, we more commonly use what we call a reverential bow. Rather than bowing at the waist, we simply incline the head and neck.

Orthodox Christians typically bow at the following times:

1. When we pray to Christ or ask intercession of the Theotokos;
2. As the priest blesses or censes the congregation;
3. When the priests asks for forgiveness before the Great Entrance and before Holy Communion

Many Orthodox faithful bow and cross themselves when they enter and leave the nave of the church, and when they pray before icons. Some Orthodox may also cross themselves at the times we just listed above, but not all will do so. Deciding when to cross oneself is an issue of personal piety, not Orthodox dogma or doctrine.

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

METANIAS

Metania comes from the Greek word *metanoia* (μετάνοια), which means “change of heart.” It goes by a few other names as well: lesser prostration, small bow, and little reverence, among others. We make metanias when asking for forgiveness and seeking repentance.

To perform a metania, first, you make the sign of the cross. Then, bending at your waist, reach toward the floor with your right hand and touch the ground. Orthodox Christians perform metanias regularly; for example, during the refrains of Akathists and when venerating icons. We also use it as a type of substitute for the prostration, which the Church Canons only permit on certain occasions.

PROSTRATIONS

You may also hear some Orthodox refer to the prostration as a greater prostration, proskynesis (Greek προσκυνήσις), full bow, or great metania. Similar to the metania, we associate this gesture with penitence and submission.

To perform a prostration, you get down on your hands and knees, then touch your forehead to the floor and remain there as long as you desire. Most people hold the position for a few seconds, long enough to say the Jesus Prayer. Some cross themselves before doing the prostration, while others cross themselves after standing back up. Those who can't perform prostrations for physical reasons may do metanias instead.

According to Holy Tradition, there are times when it is and is not acceptable to perform prostrations during worship. We do not kneel or prostrate on Sundays or during the Paschal season (the fifty days between Pascha and Pentecost).

HOW TO MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

How to Make the Sign of the Cross

1. **Join the thumb, index, and middle fingers of your right hand.**
2. **Rest the other two fingers of your right hand down against your palm.**

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

After steps 1 and 2, your right hand should look like this:



3. **Take that hand and touch your joined fingertips to your forehead.**

Let your fingers rest there for a moment.

4. **Then bring your fingertips down to your abdomen.**

Again, let your fingers rest here a moment. Some people bring their fingers only as far as the chest, while others reach down to their navel. Either of these is acceptable.

5. **Move your fingertips to touch the front of your right shoulder.**

6. **Finally, touch your fingertips to the front of your left shoulder.**

VARIATIONS WHEN MAKING THE SIGN

You may also have noticed some Orthodox Christians make the sign three times in a row, while others only do it once. Some make large sweeping motions, while others keep things simple and small. All these variations! But, which way is the *right* way?

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

Put simply, there isn't one. Crossing yourself is not an issue of dogma (belief necessary for salvation) in Orthodoxy. Instead, it is a matter of personal piety. In other words, aside from the arrangement of the fingers and direction of the movement, all else is up to you. If you feel moved to always make the sign of the cross in three's, you may do so. If you wish to venerate icons in a slightly different manner than another parishioner, you can. Each Orthodox Christian can express his or her faith in whatever physical ways they feel necessary, as long as they do so out of love for God. (If you do things instead to bring attention to yourself and feed your pride, you should reflect upon that.)

WHY MAKE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS THIS WAY?

The arrangement of the fingers while making the sign of the cross is incredibly important. Why? Because the sign is an outward manifestation of inward belief, proclaiming Truth in a demonstrable way. The three fingers joined together above the palm symbolise the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Meanwhile, the ring and little figure represent the two natures of Christ. These two fingers come down to touch the palm of the hand, which symbolises Christ descending to earth.

The Orthodox follow an impulse to make *everything* we do reinforce and proclaim the Faith. The sign of the cross is no exception.

WHEN TO MAKE THE SIGN

Because crossing yourself is an issue of personal piety, the Orthodox do not have strict guidelines about when you should and should not cross yourself. In the Orthodox tradition, we cross ourselves on many occasions. Below is a list of times when you *should* cross yourself:

- Whenever the priest, chanter, reader, or choir invokes the name of the Holy Trinity
- At the beginning and/or end of personal (and communal) prayer
- Upon entering and leaving the church
- When venerating holy icons, relics, the cross, or the Gospel
- Before receiving Holy Communion, but not at the chalice itself to avoid accidents!
- Whenever you pass in front of the Holy Altar

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

The above is by no means an exhaustive list. We cross ourselves many other times as well. Again, it all comes down to personal choice. If the Holy Spirit moves you to express your piety in a particular way, no one will judge you or look at you strangely for it.

WHEN NOT TO MAKE THE SIGN

Apart from where your hand brushes against the chalice there is one another time when the sign of the cross is not made. This is whenever a bishop or priest blesses the congregation with his hand and says, "Peace be to all." Here, we merely give a slight bow and receive the blessing.

TO SUM UP ...

The sign of the cross means everything to the Orthodox Christian. It symbolises a crucial event in the story of mankind's salvation. And it allows the faithful to commune with God in a way that transcends understanding. If you are not Orthodox, please don't feel as though you must make the sign of the Cross. We make the sign out of our deep love for God, as a way of expressing with our bodies our faith in Him. You need not make the sign until you, too, feel such conviction.

PROPERLY VENERATING ICONS OR RELICS

- Cross yourself twice, kiss the icon or incline your head toward it, and then cross yourself a third time
- Kiss the hands or feet of those pictured in the icons, not the face
- You may also kiss the Gospel book, scroll or cross in the hand of the saint, if they are depicted in the icon
- Avoid actually kissing the icon if you are wearing lipstick or lip balm!

RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

- In the Orthodox Church, we participate in what we call monogamous communion. This means that only baptised and christened Orthodox Christians can receive Holy Communion during services. Why? Because the Church is Christ's own Body (1 Cor. 12:27), His Bride (Rev. 21:9), the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), God's field and building (1 Cor. 3:9), and the Vine to which individual members are then grafted in (Rom. 11:17). And the Lord set an

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

example for us by distributing the Last Supper to His disciples alone. Only when you have been grafted into the Vine and become a member of the Body can you partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

- Worshippers who are not Orthodox are welcome to partake of antidoron, or blessed bread. The priest usually distributes it to everyone after dismissal, along with a blessing.

HOW TO GREET AN ORTHODOX PRIEST

Traditionally parishioners greet priests and bishops by kissing them on the right hand, but not *everytime!* ... it depends on what you want to receive ... whether it be a blessing or simply to show respect for the priesthood. When you kiss a priest's or bishop's hand, you show reverence and respect for their holy office. In return, they bless and sanctify you and offer the Holy Gifts on your behalf in the Divine Liturgy. The priest or bishop typically extends his hand, which you take in yours as if to shake it. But instead of shaking his hand, you simply kiss the back of it.

DRESSING APPROPRIATELY

Usually, the first question people ask when going anywhere is, "What's the dress code?" Sometimes, we put a lot of thought into our appearance when we'll be in public. This is normal and healthy, when kept in check. We *should* put thought into what we wear for church, but in a slightly different way. When in church, your goal is to worship God, not make a fashion statement or call attention to yourself. Therefore, when planning what to wear to services, always keep modesty and godliness in mind. God deserves our best effort and our humility and love. What we wear should reflect this, while keeping God's commandments in mind.

For men, this means wearing clean smart clothes, formal or casual ... but not shorts! Women should dress smartly and modestly. Under no circumstances should stiletto heels be worn; they damage church flooring. Wearing lipstick or lip balm is OK, but please avoid leaving marks on the icons. Some women also choose to cover their heads during worship but this is not obligatory.

Finally, you may wonder what the different parts of the church are called. On the next page a diagram explains this but not all Orthodox churches look like this:-

St Aidan's Orthodox Church, Manchester

ORTHODOX CHURCH INTERIOR



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