

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 8, 2021

“ON WORSHIP IN THE LITURGY”

Back in 1453 the Muslim Turks conquered Constantinople, the capital of the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire. Some of the many churches there were allowed to remain places of worship, some were destroyed, and some were changed into non-religious buildings for various purposes such as horse barns or storage buildings. When a church was going to be used for non-religious services, the Turks would remove all sacred objects and then whitewash the walls----and try to forget it had once been a church.

In one former church, turned into a storage building, something strange began to happen. Whenever it wasn't locked up, Christians would walk into the building and head over to a certain wall and bow and kneel and pray. This went on for decades, for centuries..... In the 20th century the Turkish government took an interest in seeing what was under the whitewash paint in some of these former church buildings. Experts came in who could remove the paint layer and still preserve what was underneath. In that particular storage building, underneath the paint layer on the wall where the Christians had praying for hundreds of years, they found a huge beautiful icon of the Theotokos and Christ Child. For 500 years, the Christians had remembered what was on that wall and had come in to venerate and pray before an icon they could not see! (“Ambo”, St. Theodosius Cathedral, 2/29/04).

Such respect for the Lord and for one of His churches! Impressive! Do we always show such respect and reverence? Well..... Not always! Thus, this sermon. It's not a regular sermon, but a teaching about how to worship in the Divine Liturgy.

Our parish is not particularly poor about reverence in our worship. Really not bad at all. But we could do better! And now that we have higher attendance, a new building, and many new parishioners, I thought it would be a good time to dedicate the homily time one Sunday to review some things about worship and to encourage us to a higher level of reverence for God. Sometimes out of carelessness, or perhaps sometimes out of ignorance, we aren't focused enough on proper worship. So I'll make several points.....

-----#1. **Be on time.** Lateness to church shows disrespect both to God and

to our fellow worshippers. Few people show up regularly late to work, but it's not rare to come late to liturgy. Liturgy is more important than our jobs. Remember---the liturgy starts at 10, not 10:10, 10:20, 10:30....

----#2. **If you are late.....** Now that will be rare if you are following #1! But sometimes things do happen, even with the best intentions. So, if you are late, be careful about when to enter the nave so as to not be disrespectful or disruptive.

Every part of the liturgy is important but there are some especially important parts where it is best to just wait in the narthex a bit to enter. Instead of a long explanation right now about which parts.....just let me give you a simple rule of thumb: If the people are standing, don't come in. If the people are sitting, come on in quietly.

Some priests add one thing to that rule of thumb, asking that no one walk in during the sermon. I prefer that you *do* walk in during the sermon. Simply because I want you to hear the sermon! I'm not known for short sermons, so it's too long to wait in the narthex---best to come in and sit down.

The treason trial of Aaron Burr was held in 1807. His lawyer, Luther Martin, spoke in Burr's defense for 14 hours straight. When he was done, all present were totally worn out and frazzled by such a long talk. Except for Luther Martin---it is said he looked fresh and excited and as if he would have been happy to talk for a few more hours! (Jefferson the President: Second Term, Dumas Malone, Little & Brown, 1974, p. 336) Well, I don't go quite that long! But I'm not always so brief, either...so don't wait if the sermon is under way---come on in.

So to repeat my rule of thumb about entering late----If the people are standing, wait until they sit. If the people are sitting, come in, including during the sermon.

----#3. **Don't leave the liturgy until it's over.** Once you come in, please stay in. Coming and going is very disruptive to your fellow worshippers. Children should only go out when it's necessary and then only accompanied by an adult. (And as you probably remember, our ushers are instructed to not let them leave on their own.) Occasionally, adults have to go out, too, but please---as little as possible.

Don't be like Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As a young man, the president attended Harvard. Later, he talked about a class that wasn't liked by many. It was an English history class with an extremely boring professor. But there was one good thing about the class. The professor was so near-sighted that he

could hardly see beyond his notes---the students appeared as just a blur to him. There was a big window in the class room and the professor's weak eyes couldn't see that far. So the students used it as an escape hatch when the boredom got too bad. They would just open the window and sneak out----then they could relax and visit a while out on the lawn before going back in for another dose of boredom! (Before The Trumpet: Young Franklin Roosevelt, Geoffrey Ward, Smithmark, 1994, p. 215)

Don't be like FDR and his classmates at Harvard! Stay for the whole service. If you leave early, even towards the end, you will miss the final blessing as you come up to venerate the cross at dismissal. When you do that, it's like you're saying to God—"I've had enough blessings from You for the day....I'm sneaking out early" I don't know about you, but I need all the blessing I can get! So stay for that final one.

-----#4 This is a big one, so I'll put it in formal 10 Commandments type language: "Thou shalt not talk in church." There you go.....but.....we also *should* talk in church! It's all a matter of whom we talk to. We should not talk to each other, but we should talk to God!

It's natural, even in the liturgy, to wish to greet each other and chat a little. But in church we should keep it a smile or nod of the head and a quick whispered, "Hi!". Visiting should wait until afterwards.

And even when there is not a service under way, we should keep the talking in here minimal. If you need to have a big conversation, just step outside the nave doors. And if you do need to talk in here outside of service time, do so quietly and respectfully. This is not a normal room---this is the room where the miracle of the Holy Eucharist happens. So it should always be treated with reverence. There is plenty of other space in the building where we can chatter away to our heart's content. But this room is set aside to talk *with God*.

-----#5. **Children belong in the liturgy.** It's become common in American non-Orthodox churches for children to not be much in the worship services anymore. They get shunted off to nurseries during the service. Or they have some strange modern invention called "Children's Church". Try and find that one in your Bible! And even some Orthodox parishes will have Sunday School during the liturgy---The Metropolitan doesn't like that!

Here is what we Orthodox have always believed----our children are baptized Orthodox Christians just like we are. And just like us, they belong in the liturgy!

Sure, they can disruptive. When they are, then parents should take them

out---we have a nice room to go to with them then. But once they have calmed down, they should come right back in here! This is where they belong.

Sometimes parents will say to me, "But, Father, what's the point of my bringing my little one to church? He cries, acts up, is disruptive---and I spend most of the service struggling with the situation. I have to go out sometimes, I can't pay attention to the service, sing the songs, hear the sermon....Why not just stay home until he is older?" And then I tell the parent that going through that struggle on Sunday is a very holy worship of God. It might go on for 2 or 3 years.....that struggle *is* your worship of God. And because it's hard, and you do it anyway, God will bless you for it! It may be the most important worship you offer to God in your whole life. You are putting your child on the pathway to heaven by getting him used to church and taking Holy Communion as an infant. And he or she will get used to church and be fine---they *sure* won't get used to it by sitting at home! And what a beautiful reward at the end of it all many years in the future---that little person who made church hard for you for a few years will be with you in heaven!"

And what about the rest of us with no little ones to contend with? We should work on patience and on rejoicing that we have lots of little people here for our liturgies! Because remember---if our services ever end up having no noise at all from children, just perfect reverent silence all the time----then we will have to schedule a parish meeting to decide how to go about closing down soon and selling the building. Because a perfectly quiet church means a church without little ones and that means a church without a future.

Thanks be to God! He has lately been blessing us with children galore! How beautiful!

-----#6: **Participate fully in the worship.** Pray and sing aloud with joy. Don't just watch---join in! We all sing here, so please sing..... If you don't think you sing very well, sing any way. It's not a concert, it's worship of God. And God would much rather have even a poor singer sing than just be silent.

Worship with enthusiasm. St. Basil's parish in Cappadocia in the late 300's was very enthusiastic in its worship of God. It is said that as people approached the church when a service was already under way, that the sound of the people singing the hymns could be heard outside "like thunder"! (Through Their Own Eyes, Robert F. Taft, InterOrthodox Press, 1006, p. 58) May our singing to God be thunderous like in St. Basil's church!

Maybe we don't quite literally raise the roof, but your wonderful singing raises up my heart at every liturgy. It is such joy to stand here at the altar and

bask in the beauty of your voices! Thank you! And if you're not singing, join in.....

In the liturgy, we pray, "Let us lift up our hearts. We lift them up to the Lord!" May our worship truly be a lifting up of our hearts to our God!

Let's do our best to follow the 6 guidelines I have mentioned today. And in so doing we will show proper reverence and love for God and worship Him from our hearts.

May God bless us as we worship Him!

