

**JANUARY 8, 2012 HOMILY  
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**“ON WORSHIP”**

Back in 1453 the Muslim Turks conquered Constantinople and thus ended the history of the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire. And now Constantinople is Istanbul (although we Christians still usually refer to it as Constantinople being it's named for one of our Saints). After the initial onslaught and slaughter in the taking of the city, the Turks needed to make decisions concerning the many churches there. Three main things were done with the churches---some were allowed to continue as functioning churches for the Christian inhabitants. Some were transformed into Islamic mosques. Some were used for secular purposes---storage buildings, stables, etc. In those churches that were becoming mosques or secular buildings, the Turks had a quick and easy way of dealing with all those Christian icons painted right on the interior walls of the building---they would just use whitewash and paint right over them. But one former church that was turned into a storage building continued to have Christians walk in whenever the doors were unlocked. They would walk to the back wall of the building and there they would stand before a blank white wall. Facing the wall, they would bow down and pray and then kiss the blank wall before they left. This continued on generation after generation, century after century. In the 1900s the Turkish authorities decided to figure out why. Art restoration experts came to that former church and carefully removed the layers of whitewash from that wall and underneath, on the original church wall, they discovered a large and beautiful painting of the Theotokos and the Christ Child. For all those centuries, the Christians of Constantinople remembered that icon, remembered the building had been a church---and they kept coming there to pray with great reverence! (in “Ambo”, St. Theodosius Cathedral, 2/29/04)

Such reverence for the Lord and for one of His churches is quite impressive! Do we always show such respect and reverence? Not always! Thus, this sermon.

A little over a year ago we did a sermon survey here at St. Matthew's. Many of you filled out a form and wrote down topics that you would like to hear preached about in sermons. And so, every so often, I will use one of your suggestions for a sermon topic and not preach on the assigned scripture readings that Sunday. That's what I am doing today. One topic that one of you put on your survey sheet was “behavior in the liturgy”. I certainly won't be able to cover everything that could be included in that topic but will touch on several things related to it. It is important to talk about this from time to time because sometimes when people don't have proper behavior in the liturgy it is due to ignorance of what is proper or improper. And sometimes it's due to carelessness. And sometimes it's simply lack of respect..... So let's look at several points.

1. **BE ON TIME.** Being late to liturgy shows disrespect to God and to your fellow worshippers. Very few people would frequently show up late for work. But many frequently show up late for church. And there is nothing more important than the liturgy. Remember—the liturgy starts here at 10 a.m., not 10:10, 10:20, or 10:30.
2. **IF YOU'RE LATE.....** Hopefully, a rare occurrence is you're following point #1! But if something should happen that makes you late, please be careful about when to enter the nave for the liturgy. That means to enter at the appropriate times that are less disruptive.

In the liturgy there are certain times of special reverence. And that means (except in parishes where people stand the whole time) that at those times the people stand. So if you arrive late and see the people are standing, you shouldn't come in until they sit down. If they are sitting, you can enter. Some priests make an exception to that guideline and ask people not to enter during the sermon, even if the people are sitting. I myself don't make that exception and I prefer you just come in during the sermon. The reason is simple---I want you to hear the sermon! So just quietly enter and find a seat in the least disruptive way possible. I want you to hear it and if it should be a long sermon it may be too long for you to wait in the narthex for it to end!

Former Vice-President Aaron Burr was accused of treason against the United States and was put on trial in 1807. He eventually got off on that charge but still has a very bad reputation---partly due to being accused of treason and partly for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Anyway----his lawyer was named Luther Martin. And at one point in the treason trial Attorney Martin gave a speech in favor of Burr's innocence. The speech went on and on and on.....for 14 hours to be exact! Historians say that everyone in the court room was totally numb and exhausted at that point! Except for Mr. Martin. As he completed the speech he seemed fresh and enthused and ready to start another speech if he got the chance. (in Jefferson the President; Second Term, Dumas Malone, Little & Brown, 1974, p. 336). Well, you may think my sermons sometimes get a little long, but I haven't come close to matching Luther Martin yet. But if you're standing in the narthex waiting, it may seem like the sermon is 14 hours long! So just come in and listen.

3. DON'T LEAVE. Once you come in, stay in. Coming and going can be quite disruptive. Of course, sometimes children will have to go out. If that happens, it's best for parents to take them out rather than send them out---it's usually less disruptive. And, of course, they should be trained to "take care of things" before liturgy so going out gets rarer as they get older.

And don't leave after receiving Holy Communion as sometimes happens. We should all stay in the nave until after the final blessing with the blessing cross. If we leave before then, it's like saying to God, "I've had enough blessings for the day---I don't need one more at the end." If you're like me, I need all the blessing from God I can get. So stay for that last one....

4. BE SURE TO BE IN CHURCH THE WHOLE TIME----IN THE NAVE, NOT JUST IN THE BUILDING. To be "at" church isn't good enough; we need to be "in" church, in the nave for the whole service. It's been known to happen where someone, during liturgy time, is in the hall, or the office, or the kitchen doing something. Such a person may say, "Well, it was something important that had to be done and it was work for God and His Church..." But whatever work for God it wasn't as important as the work that gets done in this room---the work of worshipping God. We should all be in here, in the nave worshipping, for the whole time of the liturgy. The rest of the building should be totally empty except for a parent taking out a child when needed.

5. THIS IS A BIG ONE, SO LET'S PUT IN FORMAL 10 COMMANDMENT STYLE----- "THOU SHALT NOT TALK IN CHURCH". There, it's been said, but.....it is also true that we *should* talk in church. But we should only talk to God, not each other! Talking to each other should wait until after we go out to the hall.

It's natural for us to wish to greet each other. But in church, we should keep that to a smile and a nod of the head. All the handshaking, hugs, and talk should wait until afterwards. This is also true when we come into the nave before the service begins and when we are making our

way out after the service ends. We should enter silently in prayer. And we should leave quietly in prayer. And once we exit the nave, then we can greet, talk, etc. all we wish.

6. CHILDREN BELONG IN CHURCH. There are many churches, even a few Orthodox parishes, where children aren't in the service much. They have staffed nurseries, children's church, Sunday School during the worship service, etc.---anything to keep those little crumb-crunchers out of church! That is a very non-Orthodox thing to do although, as I mentioned, you will occasionally see it in an Orthodox church, perhaps influenced in such practices by non-Orthodox churches.

Here is what we Orthodox have always believed. Our children are baptized Orthodox Christians, just like we adults are. Orthodox Christians, regardless of age, belong in the liturgy. Our children are not only our children---they are also our brothers and sisters in Christ and they belong right in here with us.

Of course, it's true that babies and little children can sometimes get disruptive. So when that happens and when you can't calm them, just take them out for a while. And when things are under control again, bring them right back in. They do belong in here, but sometimes they have to take a little break!

Parents will sometimes say, "Father, what's the point of coming to church when my child is small. I spend the whole time trying to keep him quiet, taking him out, coming back in, going back out....." And my answer always is---"By doing that you are offering a most holy worship to God. You are bringing your child to church and even if that means that for a while, a year or two, you personally don't 'get much out of' the liturgy you are setting your child on the right path from infancy on----and that is a worship that is very pleasing to God! And you'll have plenty of Sundays after the child gets a little older to sing, worship, and listen to sermons."

For those of us who don't have little ones, we should be patient and very glad they're here. Many of us have been through this, so we should be able to sympathize. And remember an important truth---if you have a church that is always perfectly quiet because there are no little children? Well, it may seem very reverent and worshipful, but you better start planning for the day when you will have to close the church---- because the future of a church without little crying children is certainly not bright.

7. PARTICIPATE FULLY IN THE LITURGY BY PRAYING AND SINGING ALOUD WITH JOY TO THE LORD. Is a very quiet church the ideal church? No, not always! Sometimes, the ideal church is very loud! Loud with the praying and the singing of Christians as they worship Jesus Christ.

Don't sit back and watch. Join in. Don't be a spectator at the liturgy. Pray and sing your worship of God. You don't sing very well? Don't worry, just sing anyway and do the best you can. After all, we're not here to put on a concert. The music writer from the newspaper isn't here to write a critical review. And I'm sure God would much rather hear you singing off-key than not hear you sing at all.

And loud is good. That means you are worshipping God with enthusiasm. They all sang back in the late 300's A.D. in St. Basil's parish in Cappadocia (now part of Turkey). It is said that when visitors came to that parish, they would tell others later that the singing of the people sounded "like thunder". (in Through Their Own Eyes, Robert F. Taft, InterOrthodox Press, 2006, p. 58.)

May our singing to God sound like thunder as we joyfully worship Him. And what if we do

raise the roof? That's okay, we have a good insurance policy.

I don't know if you'll ever raise the roof, but I must tell you that you raise me up on Sunday mornings with your voices. What a blessing and privilege I have as priest in the liturgy. I stand before and face the holy altar of Almighty God. And behind me I hear your holy singing to Almighty God. The power of your worship of the Lord certainly raises my soul right up! Thank you!

In the liturgy, at one point the priest comes out from the altar and says to the people, "Let us lift up our hearts." And the people reply by singing, "We lift them up to the Lord." May our worship of God truly be a lifting up of our hearts to Him. Let us work at following the seven guidelines I went through today so as to show proper reverence and to worship God from the heart.

May our great and holy God accept our humble worship and may He grant us entrance into His heavenly kingdom where we will worship Him forever!

