

10 THINGS

I wish I had known before entering an Orthodox Church.

1. What could possibly take 2.5 hours?

Just so you know, the liturgical prayers we now use (written by St. Basil) are the shortened version of the original 5+ hour liturgy of the early church. You will probably ask yourself several times during the service "is there a concise way to say this? Can extra adjectives be deleted?" Here is the truth, if there's a longer way to say something, the Orthodox will find it. Although you may not see it at first, each prayer is intentional and very critical to the liturgical service. Don't forget that the center of our life as a church family is the Eucharist; each prayer is vital in preparing us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

2. Simon Says, "Stand up!"...Simon Says, "Sit Down."

In the Orthodox tradition, the faithful stand up for nearly the entire service. Really. In most Coptic churches, there will be pews or rows of chairs. In any case, if you find the amount of standing too challenging you're welcome to take a seat. No one minds, or probably even notices; you'll likely see others doing it as well. Don't lose heart, standing gets easier with practice.

3. The Sign of the Cross.

To say that we make the sign of the cross frequently would be an understatement. We sign ourselves any time the Trinity is invoked, whenever we venerate an icon, and on many other occasions in the course of the Liturgy. You'll notice it a lot when you hear specific words like "worship" or "glorify." There is no set rule of when you should and shouldn't, it's a personal thing. We cross with our right hands from left to right. Traditionally we hold our hands in a prescribed way: thumb and first two fingertips pressed together, last two fingers pressed down to the palm. Can you figure out the symbolism? Three fingers together for the Trinity; two fingers brought down to the palm for the two natures of Christ, and his coming down to earth. This, too, takes practice. Don't worry: a beginner's imprecise arrangement of fingers won't get you denounced as a heretic.

4. Kissing in the Church.

Alright, I know what you're thinking. The Orthodox church is supposed to be super strict...how then can we allow kissing at church? The reality is we kiss stuff. It's an expression of love- sincere affection. We kiss icons, the relics of saints, and a priest's hand when greeting him. We even kiss each other shortly after the sermon during the liturgical service. You'll hear the deacon say "Greet one another with a holy kiss..." (1 Peter 5:14). It's not a secret handshake that only Coptic people know, don't worry; just follow the lead of those around you: both palms touching with thumbs crossed over each other, touch the hands of your neighbor and then kiss your own hand. Repeat. Exchanging the kiss of peace is a liturgical act, a sign of mystical unity. It's a reminder that Christ's Spirit is what unites each of us although we may not know each other very well. Don't worry there is also a time for coffee, chatting, and fellowship later.

5. We're not just breaking bread at the Olive Garden.

The entire liturgical service is focused on one main event, which is the Holy Eucharist (or Communion). In the Orthodox Church, we believe that the Eucharist is the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Communion is reserved for those who are baptized in any one of the 6 non-Chalcedonian Churches. This is not a way to exclude people, but the Eucharist is the Church's treasure, and it is reserved for those who have united themselves with the Church. It's kind of like reserving marital relations until after the wedding (or in this case, baptism). After the liturgy is over, everyone is welcomed to line up and get a piece of bread from the priest. This bread is not the Eucharist, but is bread that was prayed on by the priest during the "offering of the Lamb." After the priest chooses the best bread as the Lamb offering, the rest is cut up and distributed by the priest as a sign of fellowship after the liturgy. The bread is made in the shape of a circle representing that God has no beginning or no end. It is also pressed with a stamp that represents Christ's wounds, His apostles, and more.

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6. Fasting: The Orthodox Diet.

When guests learn of the Orthodox practice, their usual reaction is, "You must be kidding" or "I can't live like that for 55 days." We fast from meat, fish and dairy products nearly every Wednesday and Friday, and during five other periods or "seasons" of the year. Here, as elsewhere, expect great variation. With the counsel of their priest, people decide to what extent they can keep these fasts, both physically and spiritually—attempting too much rigor too soon breeds frustration and defeat. Nobody's fast is anyone else's business. As St. John Chrysostom says in his beloved Easter sermon, everyone is welcomed to the feast whether they fasted or not. Fasting is a tool the Church teaches us to use in order to discipline our bodies and feed our Spirit. Fasting is exercise to stretch and strengthen us, medicine for our souls' health. In consultation with your priest as your spiritual doctor, you can arrive at a fasting schedule that will stretch but not break you. Next year you may be ready for more.

7. Music, music, music.

Traditionally, Coptic Orthodox churches use cymbals and a triangle during the service. Old school, we know. You will also notice that more than half of the service is sung by the congregation. If you're comfortable, sing along! Participation is key if you hope to stay focused during the liturgical prayers. Now the hymns of the church pack a lot of meaning, not only in the words but also in the tune itself. Each season of the church has its own tunes and hymns.

8. Wait, is that smoke?

Don't worry we have it under control. The smoke you see is actually the incense that the priest releases from the censor. In the Orthodox Church, incense represents prayers and repentance that ascend into heaven. Each time the priest passes by with the censor, your prayers and those of everyone in the church are rising before the throne of God Himself. Don't believe it? "Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." (Revelation 5:8)

9. Our champions, the Saints.

A constant feature of Orthodox worship is veneration of the saints and in particular, the Virgin Mary. We often address her as "Theotokos," which means "Bearer of God." The saints who have departed this world are still alive, and very much a part of our church. We believe that they are the victorious church (since they have finished their race and received the prize of eternal life) and we are the struggling church. We do not pray to saints, contrary to popular belief, but we ask for their prayers on our behalf the same as you would ask a spiritual father or friend. We also believe that the church is Heaven on earth and that although the saints are not with us in the physical church they are with us in the heavenly Church, praying with us and for us.

10. Where does a non-Orthodox fit in?

You may or may not know this, but there is a multiplicity of Orthodox churches: Coptic, Greek, Ethiopian, Russian, Antiochian, Serbian, and on and on. There are about 6 million Orthodox in North America and 250 million in the world, making Orthodoxy the second-largest Christian communion. You are likely to find that some Orthodox churches are still so close to their immigrant experience, and often pray in their native language, and that they are mystified as to why others would be interested in attending. Our liturgical services, however, are completely in English. Our desire is to share the treasure and spiritual depth of the Orthodox Church with everyone. In addition, you'll always find someone who can answer any questions you might have along the way. Orthodoxy seems startlingly different at first, but as the weeks go by it gets to be less so. It will begin to feel more and more like home, and will gradually draw you into your true home, the Kingdom of God.

Adapted from a list created by Frederica Mathewes-Green.