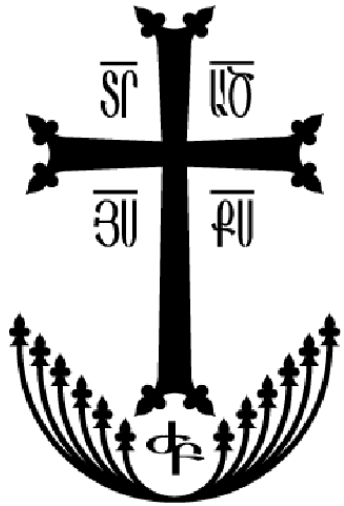


The Armenian Church seems startlingly different at first, but as the weeks go by it gets to be less so. It will begin to feel more and more like home and it will draw you into the Kingdom of God. I hope that your first visit to an Armenian Orthodox Church will be enjoyable, and that it won't be your last.



This pamphlet has been adapted and modified from "Before Your First Visit to an Orthodox Church" by Frederica Mathewes-Green

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BEFORE YOUR FIRST VISIT TO AN ARMENIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

12 Things You Should Know

*Adapted by
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Welcome to the Armenian Church. There are a number of things about our worship that are different from the services of other churches, whether Roman Catholic, liturgical Protestant, or evangelical. In an effort to help alleviate confusion, here are twelve things you should know before you visit the Armenian Orthodox Church.

1 A SENSE OF HOLINESS. If you are from a Protestant or non-liturgical tradition, you may feel overwhelmed the minute you walk in the door of an Armenian Orthodox Church. You will find yourself surrounded by a blaze of colors in the priests' vestments and icons. The pungent odor of incense will assault your nose. Rich, deeply moving but unfamiliar music will fill your ears. All around you people will be doing things – lighting candles, kissing icons, making the sign of the cross, bowing, standing in prayer – everything. To someone

accustomed to four bare walls and a pulpit, all this may seem pretty strange.

It is important to remember that none of this is an end in itself. Everything we see, hear, smell, touch, taste or do in the Orthodox Church has one purpose and one purpose only: to lead us closer to God. Since God created us with physical bodies and sense, we believe He desires us to use our bodies and senses to grow closer to Him.

2 STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS. In the Armenian tradition (and all Orthodox traditions), the faithful stand through nearly the entire service. Really! In traditional Armenian churches, there are no pews on which to sit, except a few in the back and along the edges of the sanctuary for the elderly and infirm. Pews have been added in churches in America due to western influence.

We stand in the presence of someone we respect and hold in high regard. We do this when the judge walks into the courtroom and when we are in the king's presence and wait until we are told to sit. Likewise, when we are in the presence of God, the judge and king of the universe, we stand. In any case, if you find the amount of standing too challenging, you're welcome to take a seat. It gets easier with practice.

3 BY THIS SIGN, PRAY. To say that we make the sign of the cross frequently would be an understatement. We sign ourselves whenever the Holy Trinity is invoked, whenever Jesus' name is mentioned, when the priest blesses the people, before kissing the cross and gospel, before receiving Holy Communion, and many other times.

We cross ourselves by bringing the thumb, index finger and middle finger of our right hand, touching our forehead, then stomach, then left shoulder, then right shoulder and end with placing our open hand

on our chest. The three fingers held together represent the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

4 WHAT'S THAT SMELL? When you walk into the church, probably at the same time when you hear the music and see all the movements of the clergy and people, you may see a mist or fog with a specific smell. That smell is incense. There are different fragrances of incense: myrrh, rose, frankincense, lavender, etc. It does not matter which aroma is used. Some may think that there is no need for incense to be burnt, but we are reminded of its importance with the following analogy: smoke rising before the Lord reminds us of our prayers rising before the Lord (Ps. 141:2). The Church Fathers explain that prayers cannot rise to the Lord if a man does not have faith. Thus, the burning charcoal represents a man's burning faith while the incense represents the actual prayers. Without charcoal, incense cannot rise, likewise, without faith, prayers cannot rise either.

5 PUCKER UP. We kiss things. We kiss lots of things: icons, the cross, the gospel, the priest's vestments, the priest's right hand – even each other (on the cheek of course). You'll even notice that the deacons and acolytes kiss the priest's right hand when they give or take something from him.

We kiss each other ("Greet one another with a kiss of love," 1 Peter 5:14) after the chalice is brought to the priest. When we greet one another with a kiss of peace, we should hug each other and give a peck on each cheek – this is how Armenians greet one another in and out of church. The usual greeting is "Christ is revealed amongst us" with the response, "Blessed is the revelation of Christ." Don't worry if you get it wrong. Practice makes perfect.

6 BLESSED BREAD AND CONSECRATED BREAD. Anyone who is baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity and with water may receive Holy Communion. If you are not sure, it is best to speak with the priest before services begin. If that is not possible, you can ask him after services (he has reserved Holy Communion for just such cases). When you approach the chalice for Holy Communion, you make the sign of the cross and say, “Megha Asdoodzo” (I sinned against God). The priest will take a piece of consecrated bread, already dipped in wine and will place it in your mouth.

During the Divine Liturgy, the priest consecrates the bread and wine, making it the Body and Blood of our Lord (John 6:51-52). This bread is for the baptized who are present at the Divine Liturgy. There is also blessed bread that can be taken home and be given to those who are not baptized or not able to come to the Divine Liturgy. This blessed bread is a sign of fellowship.

7 GENERAL CONFESSION. It has become a custom in the Armenian Church to have a general, public confession prior to receiving Holy Communion, where the deacons read a list of sins to help the faithful remember what sins they may have committed. Some might think that the Armenian Church does not have private confessions, but in fact it does and it is encouraged.

One part of confession and forgiveness is penance. Penance is an outward way of showing one’s regret for a sin committed – a cure for an illness, namely sin. This is prescribed by the priest, the spiritual father of the community, to help the faithful get back on track and be reconnected with God.

8 MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC. About 90% of the service is singing – with the exception of a few prayers in the beginning said by the priest and his sermon, the entire service is sung. The priest, deacons, choir, and congregation sing everything. It can be fairly said that the Liturgy is one continuous song.

Traditionally, Orthodox churches use no instruments, although some churches today will have organs. Usually a small choir leads the people in a *capella* harmony. This is still done in Jerusalem and many churches in Armenia.

The faithful are encouraged to sing with the choir because the choir’s responses are the people’s responses. This constant singing is a little overwhelming at first, but it should not be intimidating – even for those who are not blessed with musical talent.

What keeps this from being exhausting is that it’s pretty much the same song every week. Relatively little changes from Sunday to Sunday; the same prayers and hymns and responses fall in the same places, and before long you know them by heart. Then you fall into the presence of God in a way you never can when flipping from prayer book to bulletin to hymnal.

9 NO SHORTCUTS. Is there a concise way to say something? Can extra adjectives be deleted? Can we just say something once instead of fifty times? If there is a longer way to say something, the Orthodox Church will find it. The original Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church would last about three to four hours, but over the centuries, things have been removed for varying reasons. Today’s Liturgy lasts about an hour and a half to two hours, depending on the length of the sermon and how many faithful are receiving Holy Communion. On

major feast days, the Liturgy can last up to three or three and half hours.

Before the Divine Liturgy begins, the priest and some deacons, have Matins (Morning Service), which is about an hour long. So the priest and deacons regularly serve each Sunday for about three hours. Needless to say, Orthodoxy is not for people who find church boring.

10 I’M JUST WILD ABOUT MARY. We love her and it shows. What can we say? She’s His *Mom*. We often address her as “Mother of God.” In providing the physical means for God to become man, she made possible our salvation.

Not that we think she or any of the other saints have magical powers or are demigods. When we ask her, or any saint, to intercede or pray for us, we are asking that they speak to God on our behalf. They are not dead, after all, just departed to the other side. Icons of these saints are placed in the sanctuary to remind us that all the saints are joining us invisibly in our worship.

11 WHAT DID THEY SAY? Probably the most distinguishing aspect of the Armenian Church is that the Liturgy is conducted in Armenian – or so you think. In reality, the service is conducted in Classical Armenian (very different from the Armenian that is spoken today). Classical Armenian was the dialect of Armenian spoken in fourth century Armenia, in the city of Vagharshapat where the royal court was located.

For centuries, there were two different types of Armenian: written and spoken. Because the written remained the same (because it was written) and the spoken evolved due to interactions with foreigners, the differences between what was written and what was spoken became larger and larger. It

became so different that Classical (written) Armenian became unintelligible.

Today’s Liturgy is still conducted in this language for many reasons, yet at the same time, priests realize that the people do not understand what is being said. Sometimes the priest will read certain prayers in English, but most of the time the faithful are encouraged to follow along in the Liturgy books provided in the pews. If you don’t know where we are, don’t hesitate to ask someone nearby – chances are they know.

12 ARE AMERICANS WELCOME? Armenian Churches are not found in every city or even every state yet, but Armenian communities are growing throughout the United States and where Armenians go they build two things: churches and schools. Many may feel when they come to an Armenian Church that because of the different language, customs and traditions, the Armenian Church is only for Armenians: **this is not true.** The Armenian Church, which was founded by two apostles of Christ, Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, was established for Christ and all Christians – Armenian and non-Armenian. All are welcome to worship in the Armenian Church.

Many Armenians are amazed and thrilled when non-Armenians are interested in the Armenian Church. We love to share who we are and what we believe with everyone – especially those that join us in worship and pray.

If you are interested in attending and worshipping at an Armenian Church, speak with the parish priest. He will more than welcome you into the community and the family of faithful there.