

# Orthodox Fathers



## Attending Church

*By Saint John Chrysostom*

### **Churches are spiritual ports**

Churches resemble ports in the ocean, which God has placed in cities—spiritual ports, wherein whoever of us takes refuge finds indescribable calmness of soul, made dizzy from worldly business. And precisely as a calm and waveless port offers safety to the boats docked there, so also the Church saves from the storm of earthly cares whoever hastens to it, and grants the believers to stand securely and listen to the word of God with great calmness.

The Church is the foundation of virtue and the school of spiritual life. Just cross its threshold at any time, and immediately you forget daily cares. Pass inside, and a spiritual ray will surround your soul. This stillness causes awe and teaches the Christian life. It raises up your train of thought and doesn't allow you to remember present things. It transports you from earth to Heaven. And if the gain is so great when a worship service is not even taking place, just think, when the Liturgy is performed — and the prophets teach, the Apostles preach the Gospel, Christ is among the believers, God the Father accepts the performed sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit grants His own rejoicing—what great benefit floods those who have attended church as they leave the church.

The joy of anyone who rejoices is preserved in the Church. The gladness of the embittered, the rejoicing of the saddened, the refreshment of the tortured, the comfort of the tired, all are found in the Church. Because Christ says, “Come to me, all who are tired and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). What is more longed for than [to hear] this Voice? What sweeter than this invitation? The Lord is calling you to a Banquet when he invites you to church. He urges you to be comforted from toils and He transports you to a place of comfort from pain, because He lightens you from the burden of sins. He heals distress with spiritual enjoyment, and sadness with joy.

### **Why don't you attend church?**

Despite all this, few people come to church. How grievous! We run eagerly to dances and amusements. We listen with pleasure to the foolishness of singers. We

enjoy the foul words of actors for hours without getting bored. And yet when God speaks we yawn, we scratch ourselves and feel dizzy. Most people would run rabidly to the horse track, although there's no roof there to protect the audience from rain, even when it rains heavily or when the wind is lifting everything. They don't mind the bad weather or the cold or the distance. Nothing keeps them in their homes. When they are about to go to church, however, then the soft rain becomes an obstacle to them. And if you ask them who Amos or Obadiah is, or how many prophets or apostles there are, they can't even open their mouths. Yet they can tell you every detail about the horses, the singers and the actors. What kind of state is this?

We celebrate the memories of saints, and almost no one appears in the church. It seems that the distance sways the Christians to negligence. Or rather, not the distance, but just negligence prevents them. Because, as nothing can deter him who has a good disposition and zeal to do something, so also everything can deter the negligent one, the indolent one and the one who puts things off.

The martyrs shed their blood for the Truth, and are you concerned about such a little distance [to the church]? They sacrificed their lives for Christ, and you don't want to toil even a little? The Lord died for your sake, and are you too bored to come to church, preferring to stay at your house? Nevertheless, you must come, to see the devil being defeated, the saint winning, God being glorified and the Church triumphing.

"But I am a sinner," you say, "and I don't dare gaze at the saint." Precisely because you are a sinner, come here, to become righteous. Or maybe don't you know that they who stand before the sacred altar also have committed sins? For this reason God provided for the priests also to suffer from some passions, so that they understand human weakness and forgive others.

"But since I didn't do something I heard in church," someone will tell me, "how can I come again?" Come to hear again the divine Word, and try this time to implement it. If you put medicine over your wound and it doesn't heal the same day, won't you put it on again the next day? If the wood cutter who wants to cut a cherry tree doesn't manage to knock it down with the first strike, won't he hit it a second and fifth and tenth time? You also do the same thing.

But you will tell me that poverty and the need to work prevent you from attending church. However, this excuse is not reasonable. The week has seven days. God shared these seven days with us. And to us He gave six, whereas for Himself He left one. So for this one day only won't you agree to stop working?

And why do I say for a whole day? What the widow of the Gospel did in the case of charity, you do the same for the duration of one day. She gave two mites

and received much grace from God. You lend two hours to God also, going to church, and you will bring to your home gains of innumerable days. If, however, you don't agree to do something like this, consider that with this attitude of yours, you might lose the fruit of many years of toil. Because when He is scorned, God knows how to scatter the money you gather by working on Sunday.

Even if you found a whole treasure house full of gold and on account of it you were absent from church, your harm would be much greater—as much as spiritual things are greater than material things—because material things, even if they are many and flow abundantly, we don't take to the next life; they are not transported with us to Heaven, and they won't present themselves at that dreadful judgment seat of the Lord. Many times, even sometimes before we die, they abandon us. On the contrary, the spiritual treasure we obtain in church is not a possession that can be taken away, but rather it follows us everywhere.

Someone else says, “Yes, but I can pray at my house.” You deceive yourself, O man. Of course it is possible for you to pray at your home also. It is impossible, however, for you to pray as you pray in church, where there is a multitude of fathers and where cries of petition are sent up to God in one voice. The Lord doesn't hear you so much when you ask Him on your own as when you beseech Him united with your brothers. Church is more spiritually conducive than home. In church there is one mind, the agreement of the believers, the association of love, the prayers of the priests. For this reason, furthermore, the priests preside over the services—so that the weaker prayers of the people are strengthened with their stronger prayers, and thus all together they ascend to Heaven.

When we pray each one separately, we are weak. When we gather all together, however, then we become stronger and draw God's compassion to a greater degree. The apostle Peter once was bound in chains in prison. However, the gathered faithful prayed fervently, and immediately he was freed. Consequently, what could be stronger than common prayer, which benefited even those pillars of the Church?

### **Our coming to church**

So please, I beg you, let's prefer attending church to any other occupation or care. Let's run eagerly to church, no matter where we are.

Be careful, however. Let no one enter this sacred area having earthly cares or distractions or fears. Once we have left all these outside the gates of the church, then let's pass inside, because we are entering the palaces of Heaven. We are stepping on places that are brightly shining.

Let's chase away from our souls first of all, revenge, so that we not be condemned when we appear before God and pray saying, "Our Father...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Otherwise, how do you want the Master Christ to appear sweet and meek toward you, since you are becoming harsh with your fellow man and won't forgive him? How can you lift your hands to Heaven? How will you move your tongue in words of prayer? How will you ask forgiveness? Furthermore, even if God wants to forgive your sins, you won't allow Him, because you won't forgive your neighbor.

### **Our dress**

But even our dress in church, in every aspect let it be good. Let it be proper and not wild, because what is proper is chaste, whereas what is wild is unchaste.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul also commands us when he says, "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds as befits women who profess religion" (1 Tim. 2:8-10). So, if He forbids to women those things which are a proof of wealth, much more does He forbid whatever makes one curious, like make-up, painting the eyes, hip swaying, strange clothes and the like.

What do you say, O woman? Are you coming to the church to pray, and you adorn yourself with jewelry and comb yourself to show-off? Did you come maybe to dance? Or maybe to take part in a wedding feast? There the jewelry and the luxuries have a place. Here none of these are needed. Did you come to ask God for forgiveness of your sins? So, why are you adorning yourself? This is not the appearance of a woman who is beseeching. How can you sigh, how can you shed tears, how can you pray fervently, having such a dress? Do you want to seem decent? Wear Christ, not gold. Dress in charity, philanthropy, chastity, and humble-mindedness. These are worth more than all the gold. These make the beautiful one more beautiful, and the ugly one they beautify. Know, O woman, that, when you adorn yourself a lot, you become more lewd than a naked woman, because you have cast off decency.

### **Attention and prayer**

As long as we are in the church let our conduct be proper, as befits a person who is before God. Let us not occupy ourselves with purposeless conversations, but let us stand with fear and dread, with attention and eagerness, with our gaze turned to the ground and our soul elevated to Heaven.

Many come to church mechanically repeating psalms and prayers, and leave without knowing what they have said. The lips move but the ears don't hear. You are not hearing your prayer, and you want God to hear it? I knelt, you say. But your mind was flying far away. Your body was in church and your soul outside. The mouth was saying the prayer and the mind was counting interest, contracts, exchanges, fields, estates, meetings with friends. All these things happen because the devil is wicked. He knows that at the time of prayer we gain many things; for this reason he attacks then with greater violence. At other times we might be lying in bed, not thinking of anything, and he leaves us alone. We come to church to pray, however, and the devil puts a bunch of passionate thoughts into us so that we might not benefit at all.

Truly, if God asks you to account for the indifference or the impiety you show in worship services, what will you do? There, at the time He is speaking to you, instead of praying you have started a conversation with your neighbor about unbeneficial things. Even if God overlooks all our other sins, this one alone would suffice for us to be deprived of salvation. Don't consider it a small transgression. To understand its graveness, think of what happens among people when they converse. Let's suppose that you are discussing something with an official person or with your bosom buddy, and while he is speaking to you, you turn your head indifferently and begin talking to someone else. Won't the other person be insulted by your impropriety? Won't he get angry? Won't he seek an explanation from you?

O woe! You are in the Divine Liturgy, and while the Royal Table is prepared, while the Lamb of God is sacrificed for your sake, while the priest is struggling for your salvation, you are indifferent. At the time when the six-winged Seraphim cover their faces from awe and all the heavenly powers together with the priest beseech God for you, at the moment the fire of the Holy Spirit descends from Heaven and the blood of Christ is shed from His immaculate side in the holy Chalice, at this moment, I wonder, doesn't your conscience censure you for your lack of attention? Think, O my man, before Whom you are standing at the time of the dreadful mystagogy [divine service], and together with whom—the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and all the heavenly powers. Consider together with whom you are chanting and praying. This should suffice for you to come to your senses, when you recall that, while you have a material body, you are granted to hymn the Lord of creation together with the bodiless angels.

So don't partake in that sacred hymnody with indifference. Don't have your mind on earthly thoughts. Chase away every earthly thought and ascend mentally to Heaven, near to the throne of God. Fly there together with the Seraphim, flutter with them, chant the thrice-holy hymn to the All-holy Trinity.

## **Divine Communion**

And when the moment of divine Communion comes and you are about to approach the Holy Altar Table, believe unshakably that Christ, the King of all, is present there. When you see your priest offering the Lord's Body and Blood, don't think that the priest is doing this, but believe that the hand stretching out is Christ's. He Who brightened with His presence the table of the Mystical Supper now also adorns the Altar Table of the Divine Liturgy. He is truly present there and examines each one's disposition. He observes who is approaching with piety befitting the holy Mystery and who with a wicked conscience, with filthy and impure thoughts, or with defiled actions. So you also, consider which fault of yours you have corrected, which virtue you have achieved, which sin you have quenched with confession, in what you have become better. If your conscience informs you that you have strived enough to close the wounds of your soul, if you did something more than fasting, then, with the fear of God, commune. Otherwise, remain far from the immaculate Mysteries. When you are cleansed of all your sins, then approach.

So approach divine Communion with fear and dread, with a pure conscience, having fasted and prayed, quietly, without trampling or pushing your neighbors, because this comprises the greatest craziness and the worst scorning of the divine Mysteries.

Tell me, O man, why are you making noise? Why are you rushing? Are you pressured by all the things you have to do? I wonder, does the thought that you have jobs to do pass through you at the time you are going to commune? Or maybe do you have the feeling that you are on earth? Do you think that you are together with people and not with the choirs of the angels? Something like this is a sign of a stone heart...

### **And when do we commune?**

There also is another matter: many commune once a year, others twice, others more often. Which of them are we to commend? None of them, but only those who approach the holy Chalice with a pure heart, with a blameless life. Let them commune always. The others, the unrepentant sinners, let them stay far from the immaculate Mysteries, because otherwise they prepare judgment and condemnation for themselves. The holy Apostle says, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord...causing his condemnation" (1 Cor. 11:27). In other words, he will be punished as strictly as the crucifiers of Christ, since they became guilty of a sin before His body.

Many believers have reached such a point of scorning the holy Mysteries that, while they are full of innumerable evils and don't correct themselves at all, they commune at the feasts unprepared, not knowing that a presupposition of divine Communion is not the feast itself, but, as we said, the pure conscience. Just as one who doesn't feel any evil in his conscience ought to daily approach divine Communion, so also one who is burdened with sins and doesn't repent should not commune even at the feast. For this reason also I ask all of you not to approach the divine Mysteries unprepared just because the feast demands it. Rather, if at some point you decide to take part in the Divine Liturgy and to commune, cleanse yourself well for many days before with repentance, prayer, and charity, striving for spiritual things.

### **Staying till the dismissal**

So, you came to church and were granted to meet Christ? Don't leave if the service hasn't finished. If you leave before the dismissal, you are guilty as much as a fugitive. When you go to the theater, you don't leave if the show hasn't finished. You enter church, the Lord's home, and do you turn your back on the immaculate Mysteries? At least fear Him Who said: "Whoever scorns God, will be scorned by Him" (See Proverbs 13:13).

What are you doing, O man? While Christ is present, His angels stand by, and your brethren are still communing, you abandon them and leave? Christ offers you His holy Flesh, and you won't wait a bit, to thank Him at least in words? When you sit at a supper you don't dare leave the moment you have been filled, while your friends are still sitting at the table. And now when the dreadful Mysteries of Christ are being performed, you drop everything in the middle and leave?

Do you want me to tell you whose work those who leave before the Divine Liturgy finishes—and thus don't partake in the last thanksgiving prayers—are doing? Probably what I'm going to say will be grave, but I must say it. When Judas took part in the Mystical Supper of Christ, while everyone was sitting at the table, he got up before the others and left. So those people imitate that Judas...If he had not left then, he would not have become a betrayer, he would not have perished. If he hadn't separated himself from the flock, the wolf would not have found him alone, to devour him.

### **After attending church**

Let us depart from the Divine Liturgy like lions who are producing fire, having become fearsome even to the devil, because the holy Blood of the Lord that we commune waters our souls and gives us great strength. When we commune of it worthily, it chases the demons far away and brings the angels and the Lord of the angels near us. This Blood is the salvation of our souls; with this the soul is

washed, with this it is adorned. This Blood makes our minds brighter than fire; this makes our souls brighter than gold.

So draw our brethren to church. Exhort the deceived. Counsel them not only with words, but also with works. Even if you don't say anything, but merely come out of the worship service showing to those who were absent—with your appearance, with your gaze and your voice, by the way you walk, and with all your chastity—the gain you procured from church, this is enough for exhortation and counsel, because thus it is that we should come out of church, as if from sacred sanctuaries, as if we were descending from Heaven itself. Teach whoever doesn't attend church that you chanted with the Seraphim, that you belong to the heavenly lifestyle, that you met with Christ and spoke with Him. If we live the Divine Liturgy thus, we will not have to say anything to those who were absent. But seeing our benefit, they will feel their own harm and will quickly run to church to enjoy the same goods, with the grace and philanthropy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, belongs eternal glory. Amen.

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