

The Sign of the Cross is made as follows:

Placing the first three fingers (thumb, first and index) of the right hand together, to symbolize the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Placing the last two fingers (ring and little) of the right hand together and folded over the palm, to symbolize the two natures of Christ: human and divine.

Touching the forehead, stomach, right shoulder, and left shoulder – in that order – in the “Sign of the Cross.”

Many have the custom of concluding by placing the right hand over the left breast, to symbolize fidelity to Christ and love for God and man.

Reverencing or Venerating Icons

The faithful “venerate” icons to show respect and reverence toward the individual(s) depicted and to ask them to pray to God for us. The Orthodox do not worship icons or ascribe any “magic” power to them.

The way to venerate an icon is to make a slight reverence (bow), make the Sign of the Cross, and kiss the sacred image. One does not kiss the face on an icon, but rather to the side.

The Purpose of Lighting a Candle

The faithful light candles, traditionally made of 100% beeswax, for two reasons.

First, the candle is an offering to God. In the Old Testament a burnt offering, a “holocaust,” was given to God as prescribed by the Law of Moses. Today the faithful offer a donation, take a candle, and light it as an offering to God. This burned, or consumed, offering symbolizes the total dedication and offering of our lives to the Lord.

Second, the candle is a prayer to God. The constant light and steady burning of the candle represent our desire to faithfully remain in prayer before the Lord and to give all of our selves to Him in love. Accompanied by a spoken or silent expression of glory, thanksgiving, or petition to the Lord, it is a powerful devotional prayer.

Bringing Flowers to the Church

Flowers are often brought by the faithful to be placed before an icon of the Lord, of the Virgin Mary, or of the saints. Like candles, flowers are a votive offering and an act of veneration. They express our respect for individual depicted on the icon, and our request that they pray to God for us.

When placing flowers and candles on the steps before the iconostasion, the faithful must be careful not to block access to those wishing to come up and directly venerate the icons.

Potted plants and plastic or dried flowers are discouraged.

The Holy of Holies is a Reserved Sacred Space

The Holy of Holies, the area behind the iconostasion, is the most-sacred space in an Orthodox church. Just as in the Old Testament Temple, the Holy of Holies is reserved exclusively for the High Priest. In the New Testament Jesus Christ is our only High Priest. The bishop, or in his absence the priest, when vested is a “living icon” of Jesus the High Priest

No one, man or woman, ever enters the Holy of Holies except for liturgical purposes.