

IN THE CHURCH, WITH THE CHURCH, AFTER THE CHURCH

1. When you are attending the church service, let your apparel be appropriate and modest. Abstain from adornments and flashy clothing which are not suitable in the church atmosphere, where a spirit of concentration and meditation is required as a precondition to participate in a communal prayer.

2. As you enter the church, it is appropriate to cross yourself. It is also an age long Armenian tradition, just as it is customary in Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches too, to light a candle as a way of placing yourself in a contemplative mood. The lighting of the candle is also a symbol of the sacrifice of the self and the radiance of Christian's love. Just as the candle burns and is consumed to spread light, so must every Christian man and women live to radiate love, light and warmth. It is a genuine Armenian custom of piety to light the candle in front of an anointed picture of a Saint, to pose for moment and breathe a prayer of self-dedication and to prepare oneself spiritually to participate in the church service.

3. All movements in the church, such as sitting, rising, kneeling, bowing and walking should be done quietly and gracefully, with a thoughtful attitude. To talk, to attract others' attention, to disturb the concentration of fellow worshipers with unnecessary motions are not permitted. When in the church, we should feel and make others feel that we are not in a common meeting hall, but in an environment which is sanctified by the presence of God. The church is a house of prayer, a place of dwelling for God and a place of penitence for men; in a word, it is a place of spiritual purification. Our Lord said: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer."* (Matt. 21:33.)

4. The congregation must participate softly in the singing of those parts of the Divine Liturgy sung by the choir. They should join in particularly when some of the more frequent hymns (sharagans) are sung, without, however, disturbing the musical harmony which, by itself, induces and elevation atmosphere in the ritual of our church. That solemn atmosphere inductive to prayer, spiritual renewal and introspection should be maintained at all times. The solo parts of the Divine Liturgy should be listened to in perfect silence, using those moments for meditation and self-searching.

5. When the church service is over and the officiating priest pronounces the benediction of dismissal in these words: *"Blessed be you by the grace of the Holy Spirit and depart in peace, and may the Lord Jesus be with you all, Amen."* The congregation should not rush out from their seats in disorder causing congestion. Each person should remain in place a moment longer with concentrated thoughts, should cross himself or herself once again and after whispering a prayer of rededication should proceed out quietly, expressing the internal peace and happiness.