

Attire and Etiquette



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w we should behave in Church is summed up by the Second Council of Lyons, A.D. 1274:

It is fitting that He Whose abode has been established in peace should be worshipped in peace and with due reverence. Churches, then, should be entered humbly and devoutly; behaviour inside should be calm, pleasing to God, bringing peace to the beholders, a source not only of instruction but of mental refreshment. Those who assemble in church should extol with an act of special reverence that Name which is above every Name, than which no other under Heaven has been given to people, in which believers must be saved, the Name, that is, of Jesus Christ, Who will save His people from their sins. Each should fulfil in himself that which is written for all, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow; whenever that glorious Name is recalled, especially during the sacred Mysteries of the Mass, everyone should bow the knees of his heart, which he can do even by a bow of his head. In churches the sacred solemnities should possess the whole heart and mind; the whole attention should be given to prayer.

Attire

People have no problem, it seems, dressing for weddings, funerals, office parties, or dates -- but seem to think that dressing to meet Almighty God at the Mass is passé. But dressing for Mass is simply a matter of showing proper respect, not only for God, but for others around you. It's certainly not a matter of showing off one's finery -- lots of people don't even have fine clothes. Certainly, too, some people may attend certain Masses -- say the 5:30 PM Masses -- on their way home from their construction jobs. Fine! There is nothing to worry about in these things! Never let circumstances out of your control make you feel embarrassed or keep you away from the Sacraments! But one should always wear clothes that are modest, and, if possible, all things being equal, clean and the nicest clothes one has.

Below are some guidelines for proper attire (which also apply for other liturgies, such as Eucharistic Adoration or the Divine Office, etc.):

Shorts & Sweats: Just say no.

Blue Jeans: Nice blue jeans can be "OK" (but just OK), especially if dressed up, but are not ideal. But if jeans are all you have, by golly, wear jeans!

Ties and Jackets: Typical for men and considered the mark of the "well-dressed" in the West. If you have no suit or jacket, then come in the best you have, if possible.

Head Coverings: Laymen *never* wear hats in churches (except for rare ceremonial reasons on the part of some confraternities and lay associations).

On the other hand, women *do* cover their heads and have from the very first day of the Church. Please read [more about veiling here](#). Some parishes and chapels will have veils available for women who don't have one.

Special to Women: Like men, women should wear their "Sunday best," which in the West is typically considered to be a dress or skirt. Hemlines should cover the knees when standing and sitting, shoulders should be covered (i.e., "tank top" dresses and spaghetti straps are not kosher), and necklines should be modest. If you have no dress or skirt, then wear the best outfit you have, if possible.

Just a note on lipstick: if you wear some, be sure to blot really well before kissing icons, statues, the priest's hands, etc.

("Oprah 'Girlfriend' Tip": get the kind that doesn't "kiss off" or smudge...)

Cell Phones/Pagers: Turn them off.

Etiquette

- This is beyond "etiquette," but I will note here that you are to [fast](#) before receiving the Eucharist, and are to refrain from receiving the Eucharist if you are in a state of mortal sin. If you are a public, unrepentant sinner, the priest has every right and duty to not offer you the Body of Christ.
- General deportment in a church and at the Mass should be based on these Truths:
 - Christ is present in the tabernacle. Therefore, respect the sanctuary as the holiest area of the church; it is the Holy of Holies.
 - During the Mass, we are at the foot of the Cross, witnessing the re-presentation of the Sacrifice at Calvary. How would you behave if you could see, in a way very apparent to the senses, Christ on the Cross, pouring out His Blood for you? What sort of gratitude and reverence would you exhibit? Look upon the Mass with the eyes of faith, and know that the all too common focus on the Mass *only or primarily* as "celebratory meal" or a "happy gathering" is in no way Catholic and in no way represents the Truth of what the Mass is.
- If you're not shy, greet newcomers outside or in the Narthex (NOT in the church itself!) as they come in or leave. Make them feel welcome; learn their names. Give them eye contact, a warm handshake, a friendly pat on the back. Introduce them to the priest after Mass if they haven't already met. Let them know they are welcome, wanted, and entering the House of God. If they are new parishioners, talk to them sometime about events and associations in your parish. Go out of your way to make them feel *at home*. (Of course, on the other hand, some people are loners or are in very contemplative moods before Mass or just like to go to Mass and be left alone. Use your intuition and respect their wishes -- but a smile never hurt a loner, either!)
- When you enter the Church, [cross yourself](#) with [Holy Water](#) and thank God for the grace given to you at [Baptism](#). When you reach your pew, genuflect toward the Tabernacle in the Sanctuary before sitting down.
- Keep sacred silence in the church. Avoid unnecessary conversation and keep necessary conversation to a *very* low whisper. The Church is a lot holier than a library, eh?
- Please try to be on time for Mass! Sometimes things can't be helped, without doubt -- cars break down, babies need changing, alarm clocks fail to go off -- but chronic lateness for the Mass is rude and disruptive.
- **Confession:** If you go to [Confession](#) right before Mass, let the priest know how many people are in line behind you for the Confessional. If you have an extremely long confession to make and there are many people behind you and Mass begins soon, mention only mortal sins or make your confession at a later date (and do NOT receive the Eucharist if any of the sins you need to confess are [mortal!](#)).

When someone is in the Confessional, keep a *very wide berth* of it. It's very, very rude -- *very* rude -- to stand anywhere near the Confessional when it is in use by another. (I always put a hand over my ear that faces the Confessional if I have to pass by it and someone is in there with the priest. It's not that one can overhear what is going on inside the Confessional -- I never have, at least -- but it helps signal to others that the Confessional is a very safe, private place that all Catholics understand needs to be respected as such).

- **Children:** Children sometimes can't help making a bit of noise at Mass -- but it's usually the kind of noise we Catholics *love* to hear (what's better than new Catholics, especially little tiny ones?). If your child is out of control, though, or disruptive enough to distract people or makes it hard for others to hear or contemplate, take him to the Narthex, the "Cry Room," or outside. Remember, too, that an acceptable level of noise to you as a parent might be one thing because you are so used to hearing your children that you take their sounds for granted; others might find that same noise very distracting. And, please, don't let your children kick the backs of the pews or turn around and stare at people behind them.

Note that children under the age of reason (7 years old) aren't *required* to assist at Mass, so, while it is *extremely laudable* to bring children of ALL ages to Mass, it is also OK to leave them at home, too, if it makes things easier on you or if they are particularly cranky or boisterous one day (my prayer, though, is that parents do bring their children to Mass as often as possible!).

It might be best if couples with tiny infants and very young toddlers sat in the back of the church and at the end of the pew, if possible, so that if you must leave to tend to your children, your departure won't be distracting. Children who are old enough to pay some attention, though, might be better off sitting in front so that they can watch more closely what the priest and altar boys do. This will not only help them learn about the Mass, but will keep their attention occupied so they'll be less restive. Children who are old enough to read should have children's missals so they can follow along.

Encourage your child's attention at the Mass by teaching him and by asking him questions beforehand, giving him things to watch for. As an example, you could ask him: how many times the priest makes the Sign of the Cross during the Mass, and let him try to count them; what side of the Altar the priest chants the Epistle from; at what times the bells ring; how often the exchange "Dominus vobiscum" and "Et cum spiritu tuo" is made; to discover what his favorite chanted melody is and what the words mean, etc. Ask him to look and listen for things that help us to know what liturgical season it is, for example the presence or absence of the alleluia or gloria, the liturgical colors used, etc.

Have him listen to the priest's sermon and to the Gospel readings, and then have him repeat it back to you at the after-Mass breakfast or during supper. Ask him questions about what he heard during the sermon and Gospel readings, what it means, what he thinks about what he heard, what questions he might have, to draw pictures that depict today's Gospel, etc. Make these exchanges fun and interesting, though; we don't want "Church" to be seen as a chore or a bore, and the child shouldn't feel as if he's being put through an inquisition.

- Do not chew gum or bring food or drinks into the church. The only exceptions are *discreetly* breastfeeding or giving a bottle to an infant (or, of course, rare medical emergencies such as giving water to a person reviving from having fainted, etc. True charity trumps all law, and law exists to serve charity.).
- Never applaud in church for any reason.
- Do not pray in the *orans* position (with arms extended upwards or outwards) during the liturgy. Though it is an ancient, natural, and beautiful prayer posture -- rather like a child reaching up to his Father -- and though it is commonly seen among the laity in the Novus Ordo Mass, it is a posture *reserved for priests* during the properly-offered Mass. Pray in the *orans* position all you

want at home.

- During the Offertory (the very first part of the Mass of the Faithful) is when the collection is taken. Have your offering prepared before you get to church and ready to pull out at this time. The ushers will move from the front of the church to the back, away from the Altar. How much to give is left to your discretion, as we are not bound by the Old Testament laws of tithing but are bound, as a precept of the Church, to support the Church as a general command.
- If you're not [receiving the Eucharist](#), be sure to raise the kneeler, if necessary, and make room for people to cross in front of you so they can go stand in line.
- When you receive the Host, don't chew on it like it's a piece of steak; let it soften in your mouth, then swallow. One does not respond "Amen" or with any gesture but the [Sign of the Cross](#) after receiving the Host, unlike in the Novus Ordo.
- After receiving Communion, keep a "custody of the eyes." Walk back to your seat with eyes in front of you, toward the floor. The most traditional posture after receiving Communion is to walk with your hands in the "prayer position" -- palms together, fingers pointing upward, held at chest level. When you reach your pew, it is customary to *kneel* after Communion.

Both before and after you've received, maintain this "custody of the eyes" and don't watch people as they return to their seats. Though the Eucharist unites us into one Body, it is, paradoxically, a very intimate time that calls for intense gratitude and individual contemplation (you may see people cover their faces with their hands or veils for a sense of privacy).

- The Mass is not truly over until the priest has left the Altar. Don't sneak out after Communion.
- When it is time to leave (i.e., after the priest has descended from the Altar and left the building), those sitting in the front pews generally leave first ("first in, first out"). This order should be maintained because we genuflect upon leaving our pew -- and we shouldn't be genuflecting toward some guy walking toward us down the aisle or blocking his exit. When you do exit your pew to leave the church, genuflect once again toward the Tabernacle. Some Catholics also again sign themselves with Holy Water when leaving the Church (a perfectly fine, pious custom, but one which isn't related to the historically-rooted purposes of blessing oneself upon entering the church).
- **Non-Catholic Guests:** If you bring a non-Catholic guest to Mass, explain to him the meaning of the Mass, its parts, what to expect, etc, beforehand. And *definitely* explain to him lovingly, before you arrive at church, why he is not allowed to receive the Eucharist. Assure him that he is *most welcome*, and that we are glad he is with us, but that we Catholics know that the apparent "Bread and Wine" is truly the very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. Tell him that if that is not how he sees it, we believe *he would be eating and drinking judgement on himself* -- 1 Corinthians 11:29 -- and that we would be absolutely remiss in allowing him to receive the Eucharist without discerning the Body of Christ. Explain that even if he does believe it, Catholics who are not in a state of grace and young Latin Catholics who haven't yet been properly prepared for their "[First Communion](#)" don't receive the Eucharist, so it's nothing personal.

...and if he does believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, teach him about the rest of Catholic teaching and get him to convert!

- **Refraining from judgementalism:** Do not sit in judgement of those who come to Mass not knowing the proper attire and etiquette (I speak here of the good-

willed who are simply ignorant, not public, persistent, unrepentant sinners who use the Mass for political purposes, who flaunt Divine Law intentionally, etc. Even with these people, we are to refrain from personal judgements and are to love them in Truth, even as we judge their actions and protect our Church).

Instruct those who are new to the Church gently and lovingly -- and mostly by good example. Ideally, churches and chapels will have the basic expectations written somewhere in the Narthex, in parish bulletins, in pamphlets in the pews, etc, but in any case, dirty looks and an accusing tone hurled at a newcomer are uncalled for; much more Christian -- and effective -- is a simple, "Ah! You're new here! Welcome! It's great that you're here! Here is some information that will help you feel comfortable at this parish; please, if you have any questions, just ask!" -- all wrapped up in a warm, genuine smile.

Instead of thrusting a veil at an unveiled woman and looking at her as though she's the devil incarnate, give her a big smile and a "Oh, sister, you don't have a veil? Here's one that would look pretty on you!" or some other such thing (assuming you can speak genuinely). If she isn't receptive, just mind your own dangd business and let Father deal with it his way.

Finally, don't assume the ill-dressed even have better clothes or were in the circumstance of being able to access better clothes (maybe they'd been in an hospital waiting room all night, who knows? None of your business!). While we *do* owe our Lord our best, the Mass isn't a fashion show, and we've lost the Christian message entirely if we are "like to whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear to men beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones and of all filthiness" -- which sitting in judgement of other people without knowing their situation and acting like holier-than-thou Pharisees would make us.

Ref.: <http://www.fisheaters.com/TLMetiquette.html>