

Q. Why do some people say it is wrong to have pews or rows of seats in Orthodox Church buildings?

A. It is very curious, or perhaps not so surprising, considering human nature, how allowing little, seemingly innocuous, innovations in the life of the Church, even for what appear to be the best and most compelling of reasons, can have unforeseen negative consequences for the faith and spiritual health of believers which can negatively affect the purity of that Church Life for centuries.

Indeed, one can make an historical argument for the proposition that the greatest wound in the Body of Christ, the schism of the Latin West from the Orthodox Catholic Church, was as much the cumulative consequence of a plethora of “little” compromises with the received tradition as of any great global theological issue; although these larger issues did emerge over the centuries. Such innovations as stripping away and revising the received order of the Divine Liturgy, interpolating a phrase into the Ecumenical Creed, allowing multiple celebrations of the Divine Liturgy in one day upon the same Altar or by the same priest or “private” celebrations for particular private “intentions” of what is clearly the most “public” act of the Christian Community, the change from artos or leavened bread to azymos or flat matza, and the use of multiple “hosts” to communicate the faithful while simultaneously withholding from the communion in His Precious Blood which Our Lord directed “all” to receive, all of this and a dozen other innovations gradually conspired to create a rift in the Body of Christ so large that, by the ninth century, historians tell us that ordinary members of the unchanging Orthodox Eastern Church could no longer recognize in the Latin Mass the same Divine Liturgy by which they worshipped God. In the centuries which followed, each additional innovation, in turn, served to widen the chasm of recognition and to draw the Latin West and its various Protestant offspring ever further, not only from ancient Orthodox practice, but from the pristine doctrine of Our Lord which He delivered to the Church “Once and forever” through His Holy Apostles.

Now, all of this may seem like a very round about way to say that the question of pews or rows of chairs being allowed in Orthodox Temples in the U.S. (and almost no where else in the world) is an early twentieth century compromise with Protestant and late Roman Catholic culture which, on the surface, would seem to be a matter of no great import, but which, in fact changes both the character and practical liturgical theology of the Orthodox Church.

To begin with, we Orthodox Christians understand our TEMPLES to be just that. Not theaters or auditoriums where audiences are entertained or lectured, but Icons of Heaven itself, in which the People of God, The Royal Priesthood gathers to offer Worship “In spirit and in truth” to the Divine Trinity. In the worship of the Old Covenant, the worship of the pre-Christian Jews, The Temple at Jerusalem was the only place where sacrifices and burnt offerings could be presented to God. The Temple was a series of large outdoor enclosures which isolated Gentiles from Jews, Jewish men from Jewish women, Israelites (ordinary lay people) from Priests and Levites. In the

center of this complex, or rather at its focal point, was the Temple Shrine or Holy Place. Into this building, only priests were allowed access and then, generally only one at a time during the morning and afternoon sacrifices. We will remember from the story of Zacharias, the father of St. John the Forerunner, that these priests, chosen by lots, were expected to enter the Temple shrine, offer incense and pray quickly, and then exit the shrine lest the people should become fearful.

Now the same Jewish prophets who insisted that sacrifices could only be offered in this way and only in Jerusalem, prophesied that, at some time in the future, acceptable sacrifice and sweet smelling incense would be offered "In every place...from the rising of the sun to its setting."

When Our Lord opened the Kingdom of Heaven to us by His Life-giving death and resurrection, he made us able to "Draw near boldly to the Throne of Grace." Thus, we enter the Holy Temple of God, the Orthodox Christian Temple, not as observers or auditors, but as priests and stewards of the mysteries of Christ. For this reason, our correct posture in Church is that of standing and offering. St. Paul beseeches us by the mercies of God that we present our bodies, our persons, as a living sacrifice, and he says that, herein, we offer spiritual worship which is entirely acceptable to God.

It is in this posture of standing before God that we offer our Liturgy (Peoples Work or Worship). In standing, we show forth the mystery that we "Have been risen with Christ and seek those things which are above." When we prostrate or kneel in Church, uninhibited by a jungle of furniture, we show forth our profound humility before the presence of this same God who has "Not ceased to do all things for us till [He] had taken us up to Heaven and endowed us with [His] Kingdom which is to come."

The open spacious floor of an Orthodox Temple, in which clergy and worshippers are able to move freely, to turn about and follow liturgical movement, to "Worship and fall down before Christ..." without banging their heads on pews and chairs, reflects this theological reality that we are all active participants in this royal priesthood. Lining up in rows, "Like the teeth of a comb," is a Moslem practice. Sitting in pews, which were originally wooden boxes, was introduced by the continental Protestant reformers, and later by the Anglicans. They served the dual purpose of emphasizing the idea that the Church building is really some kind of fancy Sunday school where worshippers are students or auditors while the "Clergy" donned the academic gowns of university professors and were transformed from priests into preachers or "Teaching Elders".

Roman Catholics resisted this trend, but began to add benches or chairs to their Churches to allow something to lean against as the posture of kneeling came to replace those of standing or prostration in Roman worship. Thus, the Mass became a private act of devotion, participated in by each worshipper, rather than the corporate act of the ecclesial assembly.

Now, as Orthodoxy began to spread into the American heartland, many of our forbearers developed a strong sense of cultural inferiority vis a vis their Protestant and Roman Catholic

neighbors. This, combined with a powerful residual influence from the Uniate or Greek Catholic party, who had compromised their Orthodox tradition and taken on a great deal of Latin practice and ideology, confused many of these early arrivals into the delusion that the adoption of the ubiquitous pew would make them more “Hamerican,” and would make them and their church more acceptable to Americans without compromising their faith. This is not to say that those with pews became heretics. It does mean that those American immigrants who adopted this innovation deprived themselves and their children of the ability to participate in our ancient Orthodox worship in the fullest and most meaningful way.

Having mentioned children, allow me to conclude with a practical observation. Of all instruments inadvertently devised for the torture of children, perhaps none is more heinous in its effects than the traditional Church pew. In these wooden benches, little ones are ever constrained from sight of the Holy Altar and the action of the Liturgy. If they stand on the pew, they are told to sit down. If they sit, their feet won’t reach the floor. If they swing their little legs, they make horrible banging noises, and if they sit still, the edge of the seat cuts off the blood from their young legs. Finally, often in desperation, they get down on the floor and play. Then, one hears from behind, the helpful comment, “Can’t these people make their children behave?”

Not just children, but all Orthodox believers ought to be liberated from this forest of furniture to move about in appropriate way during the actions of Divine Worship, and to participate, according to their gifts, in that Royal Priesthood into which even the youngest Baptized child is a full initiate.

Yes, we need some chairs around the edges and out of the traffic patterns where old, sick or crippled adults can sit as they need to. Oddly, we often find that it is this very group who hold tenaciously to the traditional Orthodox posture of prayer.

To conclude my answer, then, the reason some people say that we shouldn’t have pews and rows of chairs in our Orthodox Churches is because they are right.