

ENTERING an Episcopal church for the first time can be daunting. Episcopalians do things that can seem odd to those familiar with other churches or no church. Why all these changes of posture, gestures, and moving about the room?

Perplexing as these customs may be at first, there are reasons for them. Some customs are matters of courtesy. Others are outward expressions of spiritual truths. A few simply enhance the beauty and reverence of Episcopal worship. Customs vary from place to place, but here are some church customs observed in many Episcopal churches.

■ When we enter the church it is customary to kneel immediately after entering the pew, thanking God for the privilege of worshiping in his church, praying for the church, the service that is to follow, and adding other timely prayers. It is an act which reminds us that we are in God's presence and in his house.

■ In the period before the service we commend the keeping of silence. In the midst of our busy lives we have too little time for silence. "It is seldom," writes one Christian, "that God finds a soul quiet enough to speak to." The silence before the service can be used as a time for quiet preparation. Read thoughtfully the words of the opening hymn, so that when you join in the singing of it, it may mean more to you. Think of the holiness and power of God into whose presence we should come only with humility and reverence. "Be still, and know that I am God."

■ The Prayer Book services are services of *common* prayer. *The Book of Common Prayer* was written

so that *all* might join in the acts of corporate worship, and all people should therefore say the responses and the creed, sing the canticles and hymns heartily, and say the *amens* at the end of the prayers. The failure of some worshipers to do this defeats the purpose for which the Prayer Book was written, and gives the stranger the cold impression that the clergy and choir praise God while the congregation watches. Every worshiper should lift up his or her heart and voice.

■ It is the custom in many of our churches for people to:

- Bow their heads to the altar on entering and leaving the church;
- Bow their heads as the processional cross passes the pew in which they are standing;
- Bow their heads at the name of *Jesus Christ* in the creed;
- Make the sign of the cross or genuflect when going to receive communion or at other times.

These are acts of respect, as natural as removing one's hat as the flag passes by. It is good to remember, in the training of children, that not only are they taught to *show* respect by such acts of courtesy, but that they also *learn* respect in doing them. However, some people do not follow these customs and, since ours is a free tradition, no criticism should be leveled against anyone either for doing these things or for not doing them.

■ Visitors sometimes remark that worshipers in an Episcopal Church are “always getting up and down.”

Actually the basic principle—there are variations—is very simple: we kneel or stand for prayer, stand to sing our praise and recite our creed, and sit for instruction.

■ At the end of every prayer there occurs the word “amen,” which should be said by every member of the congregation. It means “so be it,” and in the saying of it the worshipers make the prayer their own. We do not just permit the minister to pray while we watch and listen. Rather, we pray *with* the one who leads the congregation, and then add our own “so be it.” It is another means of expressing the fact that we are engaged not in private but corporate worship.

■ Clergy, choirs, and acolytes usually wear vestments. It is a church custom for two reasons:

- The white of the vestments is a symbol that people must purify themselves when they come into the presence of God, and it also indicates that it is a joyful thing to come into the Lord’s house. Every church season also has its own color, with its own meaning, and the priest’s colored vestments, plus the altar hangings, teach us to follow the church year not only with our ears but also with our eyes.
- Vestments help to insure that things will be done decently and in order. Our attention is not caught by a new dress or a shabby suit worn by a choir member, nor by an acolyte’s slacks in need of pressing. The personalities of the clergy, choir members, acolytes, and other ministers are, in effect, submerged behind their vestments so the congregation is not distracted in worship but is focused on God.

■ The Episcopal Church is a Bible Church. In most worship services, three or more portions of scripture are read. There are portions of scripture in many of the canticles, and in the language of many prayers. All Episcopal clergy when ordained take as their chief authority the teachings of the Bible. In the back of the Prayer Book is a lectionary (p. 934) to guide people in day by day reading from the Bible.

■ Unlike some protestant churches which make the pulpit the focus of attention, the Episcopal Church places the altar in the central position because it is the symbol of the presence of the living God in his house. This teaches us that we do not come to church primarily to hear scripture, a sermon, or the singing of the choir, but to hear these *in order that they may help us draw close to the living God*. God is the end; these things and all we do in church, noble as they are, are means to make ourselves present to God.

■ We kneel or stand in prayer because we believe these to be appropriate positions in which to approach God. Both are traditional, humble positions of the creature before the Creator, the sinner before his God, the child before her heavenly Father.

■ At the Peace “the ministers and people may greet one another in the name of the Lord.” Usually this is done with a handshake or a hug, exchanged with those in the immediate vicinity. The Peace is a preparation for Holy Communion, and so is placed after the Confession of Sin and before the Great Thanksgiving. It is a sign and acknowledgement of our oneness in the Holy Spirit. At the same time it demonstrates our willingness

to make peace with any from whom we are estranged before we approach the altar to make our offering.

■ Any worshiper who does not know where and how to find the proper page in the Prayer Book at a church service should seek information from an informed member or attend an inquirers' class, in which the use of the Prayer Book is explained.

If you, as a regular worshiper, are seated near a stranger who seems unfamiliar with the Prayer Book, kindness may prompt you to offer him or her a book opened to the proper page. People have been won into full church membership by such thoughtful courtesies or by a friendly greeting following the service.

■ Before leaving the church it is customary and fitting to kneel for a moment in prayer to God, asking that after we have left his house his light may shine forth in our lives and the lives of our fellow worshipers.

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