

How Do Visitors Experience Your Parish?

Mystery Worshipers Provide Unvarnished Feedback

By Joseph Kormos, Parish Health Facilitator

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Most of us have wondered how our parish appears to visitors. Do we overwhelm and smother visitors or ignore them? And which is worse? Is a visitor, particularly a non-Orthodox, totally lost when joining our parish for Liturgy or vespers? What do they experience? Do they have any idea what is going on?

In workshops we've suggested, only partially in jest, that a parish could set aside funds to *pay* a few non-Orthodox individuals or families to visit their parish for six weeks unbeknownst to the parish at large. After six weeks it would be interesting to see how many of them had been greeted, had a substantive conversation or made a friend. More importantly how many would return once the stipend was ended. The debriefing about how your parish appeared could be a great first step toward making your parish more visitor- friendly.



Likewise If we understood how visitors experience non-Orthodox churches could we be better prepared for a soft landing when they encounter our parish? What do visitors observe while at worship in these churches?

Enter Mystery Worshipper.com

So if the above questions are of interest to you, a set of visitor reports posted on the web at [Mystery Worshipper](#) may be helpful. (Note: We've not completely explored all the content on this website nor are we endorsing content other than that we discuss below.) Mystery Worshipper appears to have begun in the UK -- which explains its occasionally irreverent and often dryly humorous tone. Exact motives are unclear but it comes off as a form of guide to summarize the experience you may have if you attend church xyz -not unlike a restaurant critic posting a review. Reports are posted by seemingly knowledgeable "reviewers" (*Mystery Worshipers*) who anonymously attend churches, develop observations according to a predetermined set of focus areas, and leave behind a "You've been visited by a Mystery Worshipper" card. Their sometimes brutal, often insightful, observations are then posted on the web.



Mystery Worshippers have been active in various parts of the US since 1999. In 2007 60+ reports were filed on the website. As we started reading these reports -- they are in many cases fascinating-- we of course began to wonder if any Orthodox parishes had been visited. A quick search yielded reports (over a number of years) on at least ten Orthodox churches in the US, Canada and UK. At least two were OCA but none were in the Diocese of the Midwest.

At first this practice may seem improperly intrusive and surreptitious. In some sense it probably is. It can also, however, be a helpful if sometimes painful experience for a parish. On the occasion of a second visit of a mystery worshipper to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in London it was noted that the first review had been posted on a parish bulletin board – perhaps to encourage parishioners to become more aware of the needs of visitors.

We've pulled together a number of comments from these Orthodox reviews, and a number of non-Orthodox reviews as well and pasted them in an [appendix of this article](#). We think you'll find them interesting. Just as market researchers know that the best insight about a product or service comes from verbatim feedback from real people, parish leaders can use these comments to understand how their parish should be better prepared for those who come to Orthodox churches thirsting for God.

What Can We Learn from This?

Different readers will draw different conclusions from these summaries. The following is what we took away from them:

- Our parish is not a closed, isolated entity. Serious visitors and inquirers can, and hopefully will, show up at any time.
- Just as we would be gracious to guests in our homes –showing them the way, making them feel welcome, helpfully explaining local customs, we also should behave as such in God's house. (Hopefully these first two points were already clear to all of us by now. Right? Please say: "We know that!")
- While Divine Liturgy may not always be the best first encounter with Orthodox worship, we have no control over when people will show up.
- Rookie football players are often advised by veterans, "When you get the ball into the end zone act like you've been there before– *don't act surprised*". Likewise act like you *expect* visitors to your parish, that you *like them*, you expect them to *return*, and even that they may eventually *become members*.
- The gift of greeting requires personal empathy. Few people want to be shunned or treated as an invisible. However, not everybody wants to be overwhelmed with a greeting –particularly a false one. Few people want to be singled out publicly. A smile and eye contact are most always good first steps.

- Different people can and will have different reactions to Orthodoxy. When you hear of a reaction listen and consider it. Don't act on every comment. Make it a point to gather, without pressure, a reaction from each visitor. Some qualities that we might expect are unattractive to outsiders may in fact be very attractive. And vice versa.
- Helping people know what to expect ahead of time is helpful in making them feel initially comfortable. Your parish website can do great work in this area. Show photographs. Provide explanations of areas of potential confusion to a visitor. This page, from an OCA Mission in the Diocese of the South seems to provide useful information.

http://www.holyres.net/what_expect.php

Questions for “The Parish Conversation”

If you decide to explore this topic further in your parish here are a potential set of discussion questions:

1. How many new persons showed up at our parish in the last (e.g.) 6 months? Was it more or less than the previous six month period?
2. What, in your opinion, (or theirs if you know it) were they looking for? Did they find it? How would they evaluate that?
3. Did they return? Why? Why not?
4. What would be/are the experiences of a visitor to our parish? What might they find odd, unusual or disorienting? Conversely what would they find illuminating, enlivening and distinctive? What might they find if they were Orthodox? How would this differ for a non-Orthodox making a first visit to an Orthodox church?
5. Which of these disorienting qualities are clearly Orthodox – part of who we are and what we do? *They may need explanation but need not change. Perhaps they should even be strengthened or emphasized.* Have we, perhaps unwittingly, adopted American church models for the sake of “looking American” and perhaps as a result lost important qualities of being Orthodox? Might these qualities be highly valued by persons seriously looking for a new church home?
6. Which potentially disorienting qualities are not particularly Orthodox -- perhaps a false inheritance from past traditions or by-products of previous parish insularity?
7. Is our parish welcoming and friendly? Why? Why not?
 - a. Are expectations known (dress , bowing, sitting, kneeling, where/when to stand)?
 - b. Are aids available to help visitors follow or understand services?



- c. How are visitors treated during or after services? What can be improved?
 - d. How does the service end for them – do they sneak out, watch in anxiety what others do and try to figure out how one leaves the church without having to kiss the cross?
 - e. Is there a coffee hour? How can they find their way there?
 - f. Are we the church that hates everyone else? Will the visitor be assaulted by zealots who want to denounce every heresy, bad piety, etc?
 - g. What else?
8. One Mystery Worshipper spoke warmly of having a “*completely sincere, spontaneous, genuine and serious conversation*” with someone after a visit to an Orthodox Church. What conversational approaches can we learn to generate more of those?
 9. List some ineffective or insensitive behaviors toward inquirers/visitors? Do these occur in our parish? Why?

About the Author

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See Appendix for Mystery Worshipper reports.

Appendix

Observations Extracted from Mystery Worshipper Reports

Following are a few summaries extracted from Mystery Worshipper reports from Orthodox and Non Orthodox churches..

Prior to reading these summaries a few comments might be in order. Reviewers, of course, bring their own biases, but by and large they seem quite knowledgeable -- a bit like a restaurant reviewer that gets around and knows her food. Overall we found that Orthodox parishes did not come off (comparatively) all that badly. We think in part this is due to reviewers that seemed quite knowledgeable about Orthodoxy before entering the church. The more a reviewer resembled the 'man on the street' the more she found the experience to be-- well -- disorienting.

Perhaps the greatest value from these reports is to digest what strangers say they like about Orthodox churches. You may be surprised how much these observers appreciate what we often take for granted. It is also valuable to read how mystery worshippers reacted --positively and negatively-- to other faith traditions as well.

We pasted some links at the end of this article. We recommend you poke around on your own. Many of these postings, particularly those from Britain, are very funny. Reading an entire review can provide a better context for these excerpted reports.

Items in red are part of the standard mystery worshipper review format.

Did anyone welcome you personally?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

(In general each bullet is from a different parish experience.)

- "I said hello to a family while hanging up my coat, but besides that no one greeted me."
- "Not especially. As I opened the door, a man was on his way out and nearly bumped into me. He apologised. One of the candle-lighters smiled at me. The deacon was wandering around setting things up, but didn't seem to notice that I'd even entered the church. People looked at me and quickly looked away again. Quite odd." *(A Mission parish in UK)*
- "A lady in the narthex said hello, as did a man behind the stand where candles are sold."
- "No one greeted me, but the Orthodox sensibly assume you're there to meet with God and so tend to not try to intercept incoming worshipers."
- "I bought a candle from a gentleman who offered no greeting. People were milling about at the entrance but no one said anything to me."
- "One old man nodded a hello as I came in. Another made sure I had a bulletin."

A Non Orthodox Parish Experience

- “Two people spoke to me as I was walking from the parking lot, and two more as I started up the front steps. The associate rector stood inside to greet people as they arrived. Once I was settled in, several more people spoke to me as they entered their pews.”
- *Reviews included numerous comments about being ignored. Seemingly every denomination struggles with friendliness and being welcoming.*

How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- “When I arrived, there were about 10 to 15 people. By the time the gospel was proclaimed, the church was around one-fourth to one-third full.”
- “Funnily enough, it was both quiet and reverential, *and* full of people chatting, milling about, etc. The thing is that everyone is purposeful about what they are doing and why they are there, so although they are absent-mindedly greeting each other and wandering over to another little group, they are lighting candles on the way or visiting their favourite icons... so it feels like the worship has already started, as indeed it has.”
(London)

Describe the Worship

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- “I'd call it an opera between clergy and choir. The congregation were silent throughout, except for the Lord's Prayer, which was recited (not chanted) in English. All the rest of the service was chanted in (language), except for a few parts in English. Much of the action took place behind the closed iconostasis doors. At what I assume was the moment of consecration (the doors were closed), a fury of bells broke forth – the sonorous church bells, the jangling sanctuary bell, the tinkling little jingle bells on the censer. No one received communion except for about a dozen small children.” *(US parish in an ethnic non-OCA Diocese.)*
- *(A British reviewer/worshipper)* “Bloody brilliant liturgical fascism: bells, incense, icons, screen doors that keep the hoi-polloi tantalisingly at bay from the holy of holies and yet strangely don't make you feel cut off from the mystery, so much as drawn towards it. The icons, all around the church as well as spectacular ones on the doors, serve as they are meant to as "windows on heaven". The only hiccup for me was at communion time when the doors are closed and curtains drawn and the clergy are taking communion: it was the only point at which it felt like we were being excluded and cut off from

something, and it made me uncomfortable. The overall impression, however, is that God's in his heaven, is numinous and ineffable; and Jesus definitely *doesn't* want you for a sunbeam. Now that's what I call good news."

What were the exact opening words of the service?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- "When the service began is a bit of a mystery to me."
- It was nigh impossible for a non-Orthodox to determine the exact point at which the service had actually begun, but according to the missal the opening words were, "Blessed is the kingdom of God the Father, the Son..."

Non - Orthodox Experiences

- "Good morning!"
- "There's plenty of room up front!"
- "'Good morning. Please, would you sit down?' We were then encouraged to shake hands with those around us." (*Episcopal*)

Which part of the service was like being in heaven?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- "The service was beautiful, deliberate, and entirely focused toward God."
- "The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom is a most beautiful service. I was especially awed by the procession of the sacred elements around the church before the consecration, the beautiful chant used for the words of consecration."
- "Virtually all of it. One particular moment came at the end, (*of vespers*) when blessed bread, wine and oil were offered to the congregation. As a non-Orthodox, I didn't join the queue to receive these blessings. But after the priest had finished, he asked me directly whether I'd come up. I protested that I wasn't Orthodox. "That doesn't matter. Come!" he replied. And so I received the Sign of the Cross in oil, and a piece of wine-soaked bread. That was a wonderful moment, and really made me feel a part of what was going on."
- "Hearing the choir, which was just above and behind me, sounding like a flight of angels singing praises to the Resurrection." (*Pascha in a US parish*)
- "The singing by the choir was unaccompanied and spine-tingling."
- "Worship in parishes of the Orthodox Church in America is the best liturgy this side of heaven. Beautiful, dignified, comfortable with itself and with **very few concessions to the countervailing culture**, always oriented toward the Trinity. This vespers service was

all these things”. ... “Strangely, though the vast majority of the service was in English, the Lord's Prayer, one of the few speaking parts for the congregation, was hijacked into Russian.” (*OCA Parish in Canada*)(*by a non Orthodox reviewer/worshipper; though obviously familiar with Orthodox liturgy*)

And which part was NOT like being in Heaven?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- “The service was hardly visitor friendly. I spent the first half flipping around the missal looking for where we were in the liturgy.”
- “Two things. First, I was disappointed by the lack of welcome shown to me before the service. Mind you, I don't care for being told how wonderful it is to see me by people who have never seen me before, but neither do I like being treated as a piece of furniture – **glanced at by someone who quickly looks away**. Second, I was a little surprised that the choir were not more familiar with what they were singing. The basses in particular would often miss their notes. The priest sang along with them, and at one point he cringed when he himself struck a wrong note. I felt really sorry for him at that point.”
- “Only the discomfort of being in a strange church and not being sure if I could ever sit down since there was some disagreement on this among the parishioners – some standing, some sitting at certain moments.”
- “No part was like this. There were moments of boredom when the prayers seemed to go on forever, but mostly it was like being in the Russian section of heaven.” (*Russian Church in London*)

Non - Orthodox Experiences

- “**Latecomers** walking up the aisle during the responsorial psalm. That is very distracting, and it also shows a **lack of respect for the word of God**, and for the cantor as well.”
- “Pet peeve: **They asked visitors to stand up. This always makes me uncomfortable.**”
- “**This is apparently a church that does not expect outsiders**. They are all comfortable knowing what time the services are, and are not worried that strangers will show up and be confused about the time. My companion tried to point out that it was just a simple oversight, but **I was moved to anger** nonetheless.”
- “...after they were done he (*the choir director*) let out a clearly audible sigh of relief!” (*Methodist*)(*This in response to a description of a difficult musical morning for the choir.*)
- “Let's talk about praise songs, shall we? I did not mind the praise songs with the praise team so much. What I dislike is the apparent requirement that between each song one of the singers must talk briefly and with undue sincerity about how the message of the song is so meaningful. Was it just my imagination or my bias that there was actually

stronger congregational singing during the two hymns, accompanied by the organ, later in the service? I wonder if "praise music" isn't a bit like the emperor's new clothes. Everyone thinks everyone else likes it, but they don't get it themselves. The level of singing and participation would suggest this. Churches think they need praise music, but no one is sure who really likes and wants it. Finally, I also dislike prayers being accompanied by quiet "noodling" around on the piano. It seems to be rather common nowadays, but strikes me as contrived and manipulative." (*Visit to a Reformed Church, Iowa*)

Did anything distract you?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- Many comments... *fussy children, incredibly adorable babies, men talking in back of church etc.*

Non - Orthodox Experiences

- "The biggest distraction by far was the continual stream of people going up and down the aisle looking for seats. The service started six minutes late, and for the next 24 minutes I counted over 50 people entering the auditorium trying to find a seat. Couples, singles, wandering up and down the aisle, lattes in hand, trying to find seats. To me, this is not casual worship – **it's being too lazy to get to church on time!**"
- "The building was approximately 30 percent full as the service began. Worshipers continued to drift in for an additional 30 minutes! Was I at church or the train station? By the end of the sermon the church was about half occupied. One wonders if this also happens at the nearby arena during professional sports events."
- "The arena where worship is held was very bleak and poorly lit by some dim fluorescent lights. The center stage had no color, **nothing of beauty** at all." (*Mega Church in a shopping mall*)

What musical instruments were played?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- "Not a one. **And I can't tell you how restful it was.** The Orthodox believe the human voice is the most apt way to praise God. More power to their collective elbow. I thanked God often and profusely for the completely **tambourine-free zone** that is this church. " (*an English reviewer in London*)
- "Just unaccompanied Byzantine chant. There was a hideous electronic organ, but it went unused."

In a nutshell, what was the sermon about?

Orthodox Parish Experience

- “It was about Mary and Martha. The priest observed that coming to church and receiving the Word of God was more important than making something for a bake sale. **He also suggested that coming on time was a nice idea.**”

What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- “This doesn't really work here as people are milling about all the time. *(No pews)* However, **I did have a genuine enquiry as a result of which I got into a very good and completely sincere conversation with someone**, and was then introduced to others... it was **spontaneous, genuine and was really important.**” (London)
- “I went outside, where people were standing around talking in *(Orthodox ethnic language)*. I heard no English. I learned that a smile and "hello" apparently mean "I'm not one of you; ignore me" in _____.”
- “No one spoke to me. They were busy looking for their children or their friends. At the same time, I didn't feel as though it was a personal rejection.”
- “Father Raphael, a great giant of a man, came up to me directly after the service and asked if we'd met before, and we chatted briefly. After that, I hung around at the back looking lost but no one else spoke to me, not even the deacon. People again **looked at me and quickly averted their gaze**. I got the feeling that unless I spoke first, nothing would happen. As I had things to be getting on with, I simply left.”

Non Orthodox Experiences

- “We followed the crowd to the fellowship hall where several people approached us and chatted with us. *(Presbyterian)*”
- “Two people nodded and smiled at me. At the back of the aisle, the pastor said, "Thanks for coming today.”
- “The warm greeting at the beginning was completely absent afterwards. When I stood in the middle of the lobby **hoping to be noticed**, it was apparent that the folks who had moments before held hands during the recessional hymn now had somewhere else to be.”
- “No one said a thing. Almost everyone headed straight for their cars with little noticeable intermingling after the service. “

- “Nothing... perhaps this parish's motto should be "*(denomination)s* always go straight home!" ... when the celebrant said that the service was concluded, there was such a rush of people down the aisle that for me to have stepped out into the aisle would have been to risk life and limb. No one offered to let me out. .. in the narthex a few people were standing about. The worship leader smiled and muttered a "hello," but mostly I got funny looks and slight smiles.” *(The Mystery Worshipper was, in this case Orthodox)*
- “Nothing. We trooped out with everyone else. No one made the effort to speak to us. I spoke to one of the stewards and he seemed confused!”
- “(Upon arrival) the greeters had helpful answers to my questions about where to find things. (At the end) when I just stood around, no one paid any attention to me at all. Then I tried to attract a little attention by standing alone and looking through my "first time visitor gift bag." When someone saw this, he came over and talked with me.” *(Contemporary Christian service held in a hotel)*

How would you feel about making this church your regular (where 10 = ecstatic, 0 = terminal)?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- “8 – If I were *(ethnic group)* Orthodox and lived in the area, yes. The congregation is large and friendly (at least amongst themselves) and the church appears to be actively involved in the community. But I don't think an outsider would have an easy time making it as a ___ Orthodox – you have to have been born and raised in the culture, I think.”
- “9 – I am seriously considering it, which is mostly why I went. I think liturgically we would get on like a house on fire. But politically/socially I'm not as sure. Also, there's a lot of Pantocrator and not too much carpenter. For me, this church brings out Christ's divine nature more strongly than his human nature.”
- “4. If it weren't for the beauty of the services, I'd probably give this a 1. We were given a rather strong reminder about non-Orthodox people not being allowed to receive communion – and this was like a cold, cruel, anti-ecumenical shower. I was probably not alone in finding the homily somewhat ironic after that reminder.”
- “3 – The music was lovely, and everything flowed along very smoothly and with dignity. But unlike other Orthodox services I've attended, I felt this one was lifeless and cold.”

Non Orthodox Experiences

- 6 – This form of worship (Presbyterian) is very familiar and comfortable to me. But now that I've seen how it can look to an outsider, it struck me as rather impersonal, isolating

and heady. I came away realizing how important relationships and connections are to worship. A rather average choir anthem is pleasing because you are friends with the people singing. If you don't know anyone in the choir, it is just an average anthem. I left wondering, "Is this how guests feel at the church I call home?"

- "5 —... I couldn't discern what there was for me to connect to. Programs are one thing, long-standing relationships are another, but the seeker and the newcomer might have a long road to journey down before becoming part of this community."

Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- "Yes, especially the beauty of the Divine Liturgy."
- "Yes, very."
- "Honestly, the service and the missal notes dwelt on the exclusiveness of Orthodox Christianity too much to make other Christians feel very glad."

Non Orthodox Experiences

- "The service did, the parish did not."
- "It made me glad that I have had the pleasure of joining in worship experiences richer than this one." (*Non denominational 1000 person Christian church*)
- "Most absolutely!"
- "Yes, despite my critiques. The Good News was proclaimed, the sacrament was shared, and people who remained strangers to me but are known by God gathered to worship."

What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time?

Orthodox Parish Experiences

- "Being grilled by the priest. I'm happy to be identified as a goat to be kept separated from the sheep, but in guarding the integrity of communion, Father should lighten up." (*OCA Parish in another Diocese*)
- "The joyful singing of the choir, which was at times almost indecently passionate!"
- "The profusion of icons in the church."
- "Christianity isn't just about "right now"; it's also about 2,000 years of worship and striving after beauty."

Non Orthodox Experiences

- "The ringing of the bell during the moment of silence, despite the whispering."

Links to Various Orthodox Mystery Worshipper Summaries

- [Index of All US Summaries in All Denominations](#)
- [OCA, Canada](#)
- [OCA Seattle](#)
- [Greek Orthodox Scottsdale AZ](#)
- [Greek Orthodox Portland MN](#)
- [Carpatho-Russian Mission Lafayette IN](#)
- [Russian Orthodox London UK](#) and http://ship.saintsimeon.co.uk/Mystery/mws_05/reports/1077.html
- [Greek Orthodox Westfield NJ](#)