

CREATING AN ICONOSTASION

In the Greek Orthodox Church, the traditional term for a place of family worship is *iconostásion*. Here icons are placed together along with other religious items to facilitate worship and prayer. The *iconostásion* generally contains the following items:

- Icons of Christ, the Theotokos, saints, and Church feasts
- Cross
- Prayer book
- Bible
- Seal for Holy Communion bread
- Censer
- Charcoal and incense
- Light (electric or candle)
- Holy oil
- Holy water from Theophany (Epiphany)
- Seasonal items from church holidays such as a piece of *vasilópita*, palms from Palm Sunday, flowers from Good Friday, an Easter egg
- Wedding, baptismal and Paschal candles
- Marriage crowns [with or without a case (*stephanothíki*)]

These contents may be prayerfully modified to meet the needs of inter-Christian households. Other items that might be added include a family Bible, rosary and meaningful quotes from the non-Orthodox partner's Christian faith tradition.

Location : If possible, set up the *iconostásion* somewhere accessible to all members of the family. Traditionally it is located so the family faces east when praying. According to Orthodox belief, Christ, the light of the world, will come again from the East. This is why all Orthodox churches have altars on the east side. Locate the *iconostásion* near an electrical outlet if you choose to have an electric light burning continually. Also allow room for expansion to add icons and items in the coming years.

Arrangement : There are many ways to arrange the *iconostásion*. The items may go into a glass-enclosed cabinet, on open shelves, and/or on the wall above a small table. You may find it easier to work with the censer, candle and books from a small table or open shelf. The arrangement depends on your home and the number of items.

Care : Respectfully keep the *iconostásion* clean, including periodic polishing of any silver icons. Seasonal items from the previous year such as the *vasilópita*, palms from Palm Sunday, flowers from special services, and the Easter egg should be disposed of on Holy Thursday by burning them in a metal container or foil. Since holy items should not be disposed of in the trash, and no one should step on them, bury the remains in an isolated location in the yard.

USING THE ICONOSTASION

The *iconostásion* may be used as a central place of prayer and worship.

Lighting the candle : Traditionally prayer and worship are preceded by the lighting of a candle (*kandíli*).

A lighted candle represents the light of Christ who said in John 8:12: "I am the light of the world". The traditional *kandíli* is a small glass container filled partially with water and then oil on top of the water. A cork with a wick floats on the oil which "feeds" the wick. When the oil is depleted, the water extinguishes the wick's flame. Many homes choose instead to continually keep on an electric light for convenience and safety. The constant light is a reminder that Christ is in the home.

Lighting the censer : Traditionally, a censer with charcoal and incense is lit before prayers and when censuring the house. The fragrant smoke symbolically carries our prayers to God as described in Psalm 141:2: "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice". The censer (*thimiató*) is a small metal container for burning incense on a charcoal pellet. Place the charcoal in the censer, light it, and wait for the charcoal to become completely hot. When the pellet is gray, add the incense which will produce a fragrant smoke. In addition to having the censer at the *iconostásion*, traditionally, a lighted censer is carried

throughout the house in the morning and the evening while saying prayers and making the sign of the cross with the censer.

Saying daily prayers : Daily prayer together is an essential element of building your family's spiritual foundation. When family members become quiet, bow their heads, and put aside their activities to speak to and listen to God, they are united with each other and the heavenly Father. Use an Orthodox prayer book along with extemporaneous and favorite family prayers such as “Our Father”. Parents can encourage all family members to participate. Each may take turns leading the prayer and offering personal thanks and petitions. Even the simple act of making the sign of the cross while passing the *iconostásion* is a prayer.

Praying on personal occasions : In addition to offering daily prayers, typical occasions to pray and worship before the home *iconostásion* include: personal events such as name days, birthdays, baptisms and graduations; illness; and death. Special attention can be given on these occasions. For example, on a family member's name day, the icon of his or her patron saint may be decorated with fresh flowers. If someone is ill, light a candle and pray for him or her.

Reading the Bible : Daily Bible readings may also be done at the *iconostásion*. Schedules are available at the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America www.goarch.org/en/chapel .

Remembering special Church events : The *iconostásion* is also a powerful aid in observing the worship cycle in the Orthodox Church. Since many feast days and special events are based on Christ's life and that of his Mother, there is an opportunity to remember these days by displaying icons that commemorate the events. (Sets of paper icons for the feast days are affordable and easily stored when not in use.) For example, at Theophany an icon of the baptism of Christ and holy water from the Church can be given a place of honor. On Good Friday, an icon of the Crucifixion and a flower from the *kouvoúklion* (funeral bier) can be highlighted. Bible readings and prayers appropriate to the day can be read, in addition to writings of the church. These rituals are reminders of the importance of Christ and the saints for the family. Their lives were filled with reverence for God, love, charity, compassion, forgiveness, and humility—values essential to a family’s spiritual foundation.

