

Pews

[Amidst the services that our Church celebrates during the Holy and Great Lent, (e.g. The Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts; with the prostrations) and the activity surrounding the unfolding dramatic events of Flowery Sunday, the days of Holy Week, especially Holy Thursday, Great and Holy Friday, Holy Saturday and the Holy and Glorious Resurrection and the “standing-room’ only” and various processions, Fr Jonathan Morse brings up a topic that might warrant some study in regard our approach to our prayer practices. Things have changed over the centuries. Will it happen again? **Ed.**]

Why do some Ukrainian Catholic Churches have pews and others do not? One of the arguments on why churches have pews is that many of our early churches were formerly Roman Catholic or Protestant church buildings, which already had pews. This does not explain why later churches which were built by the parishes in the United States predominately have pews. Why does St. Nicholas Cathedral and the three other Ukrainian Catholic cathedrals in the United States have pews, while the contemporary Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection in Kyiv, the 18th century St. George’s Cathedral in Lviv and the sixth century Holy Wisdom in Constantinople (Hagia Sophia) do not?

This is not just a Ukrainian Catholic concern. Even Roman Catholics have some issues with pews: the National Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Others elsewhere have no pews: 17th century St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Some great cathedrals (St Mark’s in Venice) have added chairs in recent times, which on occasion are seen in the Patriarchal Cathedral.

Roman Catholic churches in the United States all seem to have pews whether they be the Franciscan missions (San Miguel 1626) on the West Coast; to St. Augustine’s in Florida, which has been in continuous operation since 1565; and Most Blessed Sacrament (Bally, Pennsylvania), the oldest Roman Catholic church in operation from the thirteen colonies, has had pews since 1741. This seems to show that something happened in the 16th century that impacted church buildings in the New World. To see what happened we have to go back to the beginning.

Pews did not exist in the first 1,400 years of Christianity. Saints Augustine, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Monica, and Macrina—to mention a few—all stood during the celebration of the Liturgy. Family members who came from different areas could gather in the church to pray as a family.

In the days before sound systems, people desirous of hearing the sermon moved up to hear the preacher. Children sat on the floor near their parents since there were no cry rooms, (which meant that sometimes parents had to walk their children around or go after their wandering waifs). Movement also occurred at

the time for reception of the Eucharist, some people moved forward, some moved out of the way and some moved away. The open space allowed people to make profound *poklony* while some could make simple *metanias*. With all this movement, there was not time to sit. Those who were elderly and disabled could sit in chairs along the walls. This seemed to first appear in the 13th century.

The origin of “reserved” sections can be seen in the earliest days. For example in Hagia Sophia there was the Empress’ Loge. This is where royalty were situated above or separated from the people yet could see and hear everything. Later in Western churches, especially in the English-speaking countries, there were boxes which may or may not have had benches that were reserved for very important people.

Royalty always seemed to have the option of exclusive seating whether in the East or the West of the 4th century or the 18th, respectively. What happened to make the rest of the people sit down?

Some scholars point to the need of people to “participate.” This meant “restrict the walking around” and direct the people’s attention to the altar and the pulpit. The pulpit, which used to be in the center of the Church, was repositioned. Have you noticed and/or wondered why our Patriarch’s throne during the liturgy is not at the altar but in the center of the church? Simply: so people could hear him whether it was in prayer or in his preaching.

But, in the West the pulpit moved to the front, so people sitting on benches or pews could have their attention directed to the preacher. Some scholars say that the use of pews was a form of clericalism, in other words the clergy became the focus of all liturgical and preaching life in the congregation. In the Byzantine tradition there is a notable resistance to this, in the use of lay ministers and deacons moving in and around the church during the liturgy causing attention to be drawn—if just for a short time—away from the priest.

Other scholars point to the Protestant Reformation as the cause of the addition of pews. In the Reformation, Protestants, to show how non-Catholic they became, eliminated most of the liturgical elements. The Eucharist became a statement of what Jesus said at the Last Supper and the distribution of the elements. What was left was the sermon. Sermons became longer and longer, so the desire of people to sit became stronger and stronger.

Real “participation” disappeared. Pews were added and pew rent was an early feature in the United States. People would rent their pew for the service or for the year. Whether this is the basis for some people always sitting in the same place and not moving for others would be an interesting historical study.

Where does our Church stand on this issue? Where do we go from here?

Fr Jonathan Morse