

Did You Know...

✠ News and trivia from our parish and the Catholic Church ✠
-- contributed by the Christ Child Church Women's Club --

Christ Child Catholic Church

Dedicated to Growth in Christ and to the Challenges of Loving Service

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Church Pews

Most of us don't think much about church pews, other than *where* we want to sit for services. Sure, some pews are more comfortable, and some are certainly more ornate -- but in general, we go to church, pick a seat, and that's all there is to it. But did you know that historical churches, and even some today, have no seating at all?



Standing and Kneeling

Prior to the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648), there were few seats of any kind in the churches; people stood for Mass and all other ceremonies. Only a few scattered benches were available for the sick or elderly. Catholics began to use general seating only after the Protestants introduced the practice.

It was essentially a practical matter; early churches had centralized pulpits, and the congregation would gather on all sides around the (un-amplified) speaker for the brief homily. Everybody was almost constantly moving around, and there was little opportunity for sitting.

And not only was standing quite commonplace, but kneeling, in contrast, was somewhat rare. In earlier times, kneeling was considered an act of contrition, a repentance for specific sin(s). Only later did kneeling come to be regarded as a reverent posture to symbolize our love and devotion.



Pews and Wealth

After the Reformation, homilies became longer, and sitting for portions of the Mass became more appealing. But when sitting down first became acceptable in church, you might not be surprised that only the wealthy were so privileged. Why? Simply because they were the only ones who could afford the furniture. In fact, the churches didn't own the seats or pews in early times; they were bought by the upper class parishioners, and prominently labeled with the owner's name.

Ah, but not all seating was occupied by the owners. Some seats were left for the "lower class" attendees, and -- you guessed it, they had to pay for their seats. Un-paid trespassers could be escorted out of the church. Occasionally, for the highest-priced and best-positioned seating, legal battles would be fought over ownership and occupancy!

Later, the churches continued the economics of paid seating by levying "pew rents", which levied mandatory seating fees, and of course added to the overall revenues collected for church operations.

This pay-to-sit practice continued all the way up into the 1800's, humorously annotated by the ever-salty Mark Twain. When he sat in a private pew one Sunday, the owner passed a note to him saying "Do you know how much I paid for this pew?", to which Twain scribbled back "Too much".

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Some churches, notably in the Eastern sphere (Byzantine and Orthodox), still to this day refuse to allow pews. Their rationale is that sitting encourages a too-passive participation in the proceedings, a tendency to "watch the religious professionals" do their thing. They equate pews with bleachers in the ball park. This is obviously a topic for endless debate.

But at least for our western churches, the pay-to-sit church culture has changed, and in today's modern world we are blessed with reasonably comfortable -- and free -- seating. Well, except maybe for Christmas and Easter, when there never seem to be enough seats <grin>.

Still Curious? -- see these links:

<https://diosav.org/sites/all/files/archives/S8644p03.pdf>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/7693232/Sacred-Mysteries-Renting-the-best-seats-in-church.html>

<https://www.episcopalcafe.com/a-church-without-pews/>

-- this one is a virtual encyclopedia from 1844:

http://anglicanhistory.org/misc/freechurch/fowler_pews1844.html

--- *Karin and Greg Illes*

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<http://christchild.org/did-you-know-articles>