

# A CULTURAL CUSTOMARY

---

*Information and Advice  
about American Customs and Practices  
for International Priests*

*Institute for Priests and Presbyterates  
Saint Meinrad Seminary & School of Theology  
2024*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Experiencing a new or different culture can mean encountering things that are surprising, puzzling or even shocking. There are practices that we don't understand and expressions that make little or no sense. Unfamiliar foods can be intimidating.

Over time, with the help of patient and understanding locals, knowledge and understanding grow and develop. But it does take time.

This “Cultural Customary” is designed to help international priests adjust to American culture and understand American customs. It is by no means exhaustive, but hopes to provide some basic suggestions and advice to support the international priest’s transition into life and ministry in the United States.

Both the Christian and monastic traditions recognize that human growth and religious conversion are lifelong processes. We respect the gradual aspect of all human growth while, at the same time, we follow the Gospel’s mandate for continual, daily conversion. That’s something important for us to remember and practice for ourselves as priests – in all aspects of our lives. As St. Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Galatians, we are “not to grow weary in doing what is right.” Challenges are inevitable – what’s important is that we learn from them and move on.

Healthy relationships are necessary not only for the peace and growth of the communities in which we live and minister, but also for us as priests. Choosing to remain isolated from others inevitably ignores the Christian command to become more fully human. Learning about culture and customs, adapting to them and practicing them in all our interactions help us to be more effective priests.

## **VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

In general, Americans may use “small talk” to begin a conversation. Unfortunately, these niceties might not always be heartfelt. For example, Americans may say “We should get together for lunch sometime” to be polite, but they aren’t necessarily committed to making plans.

Americans can be quite direct in their communication about their desires or preferences. Other cultures may “dance around” a subject or hint at a desire or preference rather than explicitly stating it. It is important for a priest to be honest and direct, but always with charity.

Tone of voice and volume are frequently used to convey emphasis, seriousness, or emotion. Louder is not always better, nor is excessively animated speech accompanied by strong gestures. Most Americans tend to be more reserved, and don’t usually express great emotion in public.

## BODY LANGUAGE

Different cultures have different customs regarding body language. For example, in some cultures, people avoid direct eye contact with others as a sign of respect. In other cultures, people stand very close to those with whom they are speaking, and they might find it quite natural to touch the other person on the arm or the shoulder. Indeed, customs regarding body language vary from culture to culture.

In general, Americans prefer a bit of space between themselves and other people. For example, many Americans become uncomfortable if a person stands too close when speaking to them, or if someone sits too close to them—especially if there is room to move a bit farther away.

Americans are typically open, warm people, but, at the same time, are not always comfortable with physical closeness with someone they don't know well. Leaving a bit of space between yourself and the other person is usually a good idea.

While respecting physical space, Americans generally like to look each other in the eye when they are speaking with each other - even if that person is one's senior or superior. Avoiding direct eye contact can suggest that one is not being truthful or has something to hide.

Complexities of our times challenge us, as priests, to be especially conscious of our body language. When greeting someone, either a man or a woman, young or old, the preferred gesture for a priest is to shake hands. Do not presume familiarity with embraces, hugs, or other forms of personal contact.

**It is essential to know your diocese's policies and procedures concerning proper conduct when dealing with parishioners, especially children and vulnerable adults.**

## FORMALITY / INFORMALITY

Some cultures have a very clearly defined class system. In the United States, however, classes are more fluid. The rich and the poor enjoy equality before the law, and the poor can “work their way up” the social ladder through hard work and success.

Some cultures have very clear expectations about the level of formality or informality required or permitted in certain situations or interactions, based on class, status, age, gender, or hierarchical position. Some languages even have verb forms and other linguistic usages that help to determine the level of formality or informality within verbal interactions.

In general, Americans tend to be informal in their day-to-day speech and manner. The English language does not really have many verbal clues to help determine the level of formality or informality. At the same time, there are situations where a more formal tone is appropriate. Since there are no hard and fast rules, most of this needs to be learned by experience and by intuition. When in doubt, it is better to be more formal rather than too informal. Whether speaking with youth or older adults, it is important, *especially for a priest*, to be polite and respectful.

## ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION (EMAIL)

Email has become a standard form of communication in American culture with its own developing norms for courtesy and politeness. First and foremost, it is important to remember that email is never a “secure” mode of communication. What you write in an email can be easily replicated and distributed many times over without your knowledge. A priest needs to be extremely careful when referencing personal, confidential, or very sensitive matters in email.

When corresponding by email, it is good practice to use more formal salutations like “Dear Mr. Smith,” “Dear Bishop Jones,” “Good morning, Mrs. Alberts.” Simple conclusions like “Sincerely” or “Respectfully” generally suffice.

## PERSONAL HYGIENE

Americans value maintaining good personal hygiene. Here are some practices that most Americans consider to be essential for maintaining good hygiene:

- *Bathing or Showering Frequently:* It is a good practice to shower at least once a day, especially after playing sports or exercising.
- *Using Underarm Deodorant:* Most Americans are quite sensitive to body odor. In addition to regular bathing, using an underarm deodorant every day helps to avoid bad body odor.
- *Using Mouthwash:* Most Americans are also quite sensitive to bad breath. In addition to brushing and flossing the teeth, brushing the top surface of the tongue, and rinsing the mouth with mouthwash once or twice a day helps to avoid bad breath.
- *Washing Clothes Regularly:* Clothing absorbs many odors each day. The best way to be sure that clothes contribute to good hygiene is to wash them regularly.
- *Coughing, Sneezing, Clearing One’s Nose:* In general, Americans are observant to the way a person coughs, sneezes or clears one’s nose. For the good health of all, you should cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing. It is best not to cough or sneeze into your hand, but instead into your arm (at the elbow) or into a handkerchief. If you are in public, and need to clear your nose, it is acceptable to blow your nose gently into a tissue or handkerchief. It is not acceptable to pick your nose with your fingers.
- *Maintaining good health:* Appropriate respect for our physical health honors the goodness of God’s creation and recognizes the holistic nature of our well-being. Proper care for our health includes developing good habits regarding diet, exercise, recreation, rest, and medical consultations. Self-destructive habits or patterns (smoking, excessive drinking, overeating, etc.) need to be identified, confronted, and remedied.

Regular hand-washing and using a hand sanitizer—especially during cold and flu season—are good practices to promote and preserve health and well-being.

## **PUNCTUALITY**

While some cultures have a more relaxed approach to time, appointments and punctuality, it is important to understand that most Americans are guided closely by the clock. For the majority of Americans, punctuality is expected and even required.

Being on time is regarded as being courteous; being late is considered to be uncaring or rude. It is appropriate to offer an apology if one is late for an engagement or appointment.

## **SPEAKING ENGLISH**

One of our most precious "possessions" is our first language. It is natural that we find speaking in our first language to be relaxing and comfortable. At the same time, it is very important that international priests continue to develop their mastery of English. This is critical for your effective ministry.

The use of English can also be a matter of courtesy toward those who don't understand your first language. Even though it may not be intended, speaking in your first language can exclude others from the conversation instead of welcoming others into the discussion.

As a matter of practicality and hospitality, speaking English—especially in mixed cultural settings—is highly encouraged.

## **TABLE MANNERS**

In general, Americans don't want to hear a person eating (smacking the lips) or to see the food that someone is eating (eating with the mouth open). Americans prefer that their table mates chew their food quietly, with their mouths closed. It is a common courtesy to avoid speaking while chewing food.

The setting for meals, the utensils used, and the foods served can vary from the very casual to very formal, depending on the occasion or event. When you are in new situations, it is always good to discreetly observe others and recognize appropriate behaviors in those situations. Some things you may wish to pay particular attention to include using utensils, whether to pick up food with the fingers, and using the napkin.

For more formal occasions, the tables may be set with extra silverware. If you have not experienced this before, it can be a bit of a mystery. For example, "Why do I have two forks?" "Why is there an extra spoon at the top of my plate?" Here are some suggestions for more formal dining situations:

- In general, one uses utensils in the course of a meal working from the outside in.
- The small plate at the upper left of your place is for bread or a roll.
- The bowl on your large plate is for salad or soup.
- If there are two forks at your place, the smaller fork on the far left is for your salad. The larger fork is for your main course.
- If there are two spoons at your place, the larger spoon at the far right is for your soup. The smaller spoon is to stir your coffee or tea.
- If there is a dessert at the meal, there will be a fork or a spoon at the top of your plate (near the glass and the bread plate).