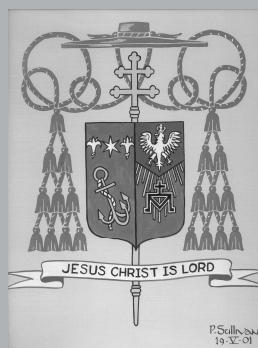


How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

Signs, Words & Substance



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

It would be safe to say that we Catholics must often appear odd to many people in the world around us or at least different, not in the way we choose to dress or act in public, but rather in the way we worship. If our non Catholic friends should choose to join us on the occasion of a funeral or wedding, they will inevitably ask us: “What’s all this getting up and down you do, these strange gestures and signs you make, these pictures you have hanging on the walls of your church?” Good question. Many of these folk, particularly those of a more fundamentalist background, are satisfied with functional simplicity in their church buildings and, indeed, even in the very style of their worship itself: a soft recliner seat, a good sound system, songs that are simple to sing, a rousing homily by the pastor and Sunday morning will be a success.

For those of us who are Catholic, however, the experience of worship is more complex but satisfying nonetheless. There is seldom a dull moment at mass, at least for those who know the meaning of the prayers, signs and gestures that have been part of our worship for centuries.

Catholicism has been accused of many things in its long and sacred history. But one label it has consistently refused to accept from its inception is the title Gnosticism, an ancient heresy which claimed that human life is imprisoned in a creation controlled by evil or sinister forces. In short, for Gnostics, earth and matter are evil, things of the spirit are good.

Catholics, on the other hand, have always lovingly embraced and respected material things, indeed, the entire universe (water, air, light and darkness, the beauty of the heavens and the earth), all the works of human hands: bread and wine, oil and incense, the light of candles. We lift up our hands and hearts to the One who has created the very things about which we need to speak words of worship and prayer. As baptized and redeemed Christians, we stand erect at the proclamation of Jesus’ words. In short, all these material things, these signs, postures and gestures are important to us, not in themselves, but because they are doors to the sacred. We realize, along with the apostle Paul, that as human beings we have no other access to God than through the things of earth.



Never be satisfied with externals . . . but rather
let them lead us in our search for God . . .

We are safe in saying all this, of course, because Jesus himself saw signs of God's spirit buried in earthly realities: He spoke eloquently of the lilies of the field, the birds of the air. When life became burdensome for him, he retreated with his friends and disciples into the silence of the mountains or the desert. Bread for him was a sign of God's nourishment, wine a sign of joy and celebration, water a sign of God's gift to quench our thirst for eternal life. In short, nothing escaped Jesus' notice. He had eyes to see and the understanding to comprehend all that was naturally sacred.

It has, therefore, been the task and, indeed, the joy of our church over the course of many centuries to point out for us all those realities which help us lift up our hearts in prayer. In simplest terms, it is called liturgy, a work of the people.

However, there sometimes lurks a danger in our symbolic use of material things in liturgy. Because we repeat them so often there is the tendency for us, as in many other human actions, "to do the right thing for the wrong reason," to become trapped in performing the action, while overlooking its meaning.

The German poet and dramatist, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, once pointed this out to us in these lines:

In every new situation
we must start all over again,
like children,
to cultivate a passionate interest
in things and events,
and begin by taking delight in externals
until we have the good fortune
to grasp the substance.

This must be our task as Catholics, therefore, never to be satisfied simply with externals, with signs of the sacred, but rather to let them lead us in our search for substance, for the God who is the source of all our prayer, all our longing.

In forthcoming articles we shall attempt to explore our Catholic worship, asking not only what we do but why we do it. Our resource shall be the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (GIRM), that ancient book of prayers and directions which for centuries has given us guidance in our efforts to worship the God who gives meaning to our prayer and is the very substance of all we say and do.

Rev. LeRoy E. Clementich, C.S.C.
Editor

Rev. Mr. Theodore Greene
Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission

Dr. Peter J. Zografos
Office of Evangelization