

The Mass (Part I)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE FURNISHINGS OF THE CHURCH

It might be helpful to go back to our grade school religious ed class and recall some of the simple teachings about the Mass. Fortunately, you can read these articles secretly, so you don't have to go to a class where everyone will know that you need some remediation.

Let's start with some furniture issues. At the door to the church, we find little bowls of water stuck on the wall or in stands. These are called holy water stoops. The water in them has been blessed, and it helps us to remember that we have been cleansed from our sins through baptism. We dip our finger into the bowl and make the sign of the cross, perhaps joining this to a simple prayer: "Lord wash me from my sins as I enter your house, in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." When you walk into a contemporary church building the first things you see are the pews, unfortunately. Pews are a medieval invention. Before then, people stood for the Mass, which was much longer than today.

Entering our pew (or finding a place to stand!) we genuflect, touching our right knee to the floor. In times past, there were many genuflections. You could watch the priest and servers do these dozens of times. That's why priests were thinner in the past - they had lots of exercise in the Mass. Now, the number of genuflections has been greatly reduced. For the people in the assembly there are only two times: once as we enter the pew, and once as we leave at the end of the Mass. This is appropriate when the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle, located in the view of the congregation. If the Blessed Sacrament is not reserved (as from Holy Thursday through the Vigil Mass of Easter) then a bow (lower the head) is appropriate.

Now, back to the furniture. If you stand in the center at the back of the Church, looking straight ahead, you see a number of important objects, some define the meaning and purpose of the space. Starting at the top, you see a crucifix. Actually, the artistic representation of Jesus' Death comes in all sorts of forms. Sometimes Jesus is still alive on the cross, and at others, he has died. We sometimes make the crucifix more palatable, easier to look at. In fact it was many hundreds of years after the Death of Jesus when drawings of the crucifixion began to appear. His Death is a very painful reality for those who love him.

Below the crucifix is the altar. An altar is a place of sacrifice, and that is what the Mass is about: the offering of Jesus on the cross for the sake of the redemption of humanity. But the altar also represents Jesus' Body. One of the things accomplished on the cross is that He replaces the old ways of worshipping God. The focus of this replacement is Jesus himself. So, when the priest enters the church for the Mass, he goes to the altar and kisses it. This is truly an act of affection. Our love for Jesus is expressed in this kiss. If there is one piece of furniture that is regarded as essential to the church, it is the altar. Architectural norms direct us to make the altar the visual center and focus of the church.

Among the most important furnishings is the tabernacle, the place where the Blessed Sacrament, the consecrated Bread of the Mass, is reserved. Even in churches where the tabernacle is in another little

chapel, it is to be adorned with honor and dignity. There is a trend to return to placing the tabernacle in the view of the people, in the main church.

More about this next time...