

The Mass (Part VII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE PROCESSION

The procession at the beginning of the Mass includes some elements that give us opportunity for considering some important practices. The first is the carrying of the Gospel book in the procession. The sacred text of Holy Scripture has long been regarded as due our respect and honor. One of the popular saints of Christian history is St. Lawrence, a deacon who was martyred in 285. One of the most wonderful pieces of Christian art in all the world is a little mosaic in a mausoleum (Gala Palicidia) in Ravenna, Italy. It shows St. Lawrence with the instrument of his martyrdom, a gridiron. He stands holding a processional cross in one hand and a copy of the text of the Holy Scriptures in the other. Behind him is a cabinet filled with scrolls, books of the Bible.

St. Lawrence was put to death in part because he would not surrender, for their destruction, the copies of the holy writings of the Church. And for this act, empowered by God's grace, he has been venerated as a champion of our faith throughout history. Such a highly revered saint of the Church is a testimony to the importance that we as Catholics place on the Holy Scriptures. May he even now assist us in putting into practice the words that we read from the Bible.

In the procession, a deacon (or a lay person, if there is no deacon) carries the Book of Gospels as we celebrate the Word of God, present in the Church. This book contains the various Gospel readings for Sundays and Holy Days. While the other readings are also God's Word, the Gospel readings are especially significant. As the procession enters the sanctuary, the Book of Gospels is placed on the altar, where it remains until the Gospel reading is proclaimed. The Gospel Book is of extraordinary value to us, because of what it is to us. It can even be used by a bishop as an object of blessing the people at Mass.

The obvious goal of the procession is the sanctuary, the area that surrounds the altar. This physical space in the Church is very important. In some churches this area is hard to identify, as there is very little visual or physical separation between the nave (the area where the pews or seating is located) and the area that surrounds the altar. In older Churches this was easier since there was (and in some cases still is) an altar rail that defines the area of the sanctuary. In most larger Churches today, the sanctuary is an elevated space that surrounds the altar. Catholic liturgical norms today regard the sanctuary with particular respect. It designates the space within the Church where the sacrifice of the Mass is offered.

It will certainly be considered curious to the modern person to know that in times past, this and various other areas within and around the Church building, were places of protection and asylum for those pursued as fugitives. Various medieval laws protected those who found themselves inside the sanctuary of the Church. (In some cases an area of one mile from the Church altar was considered sanctuary.) This obviously gave rise to the use of the phrase, "to seek sanctuary" as a means of protection. A person who violated this right of sanctuary could be severely punished. The motive for

this was not providing some kind of arbitrary protection from justice, retribution or punishment. (This is the reason for the Old Testament cities of sanctuary.) Rather, it reflects the bygone sensitivity that people had toward holy things. The violence and ferocity of the pursuit of a fugitive could not violate the holy place of the Lord's sacrifice.