

Distinct Rites: The Mass and Military Honors

Memorial of Saint Gregory the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church

September 3, 2019

Dear CTKCC Parishioners,

Saint Gregory the Great is remembered by the Church for many reasons, but certainly his love for and reform of the liturgy ranks high on the list. This moves me to take the time to say a few things about our most sacred liturgy, the Mass, and address the controversy raised by my insistence that national or other civic symbols are not appropriate in the Mass.

When each of us was brought to the Church for baptism, the presiding priest or deacon first greeted the parents and asked what they want of the Church: “Baptism”; “Life in Christ”; or some other appropriate response is given. After confirming with the parents and the Godparents that they are willing to take on the responsibility of training the child in the practice of the faith of the Church, the presider then says to the child, “... the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior, by marking you with the sign of the cross; and I ask your parents and godparents to do the same.”

Each and every time we make the Sign of the Cross, we affirm that we are Christ’s. When we enter the Church and sign ourselves with holy water, we do so while also reminding ourselves of our baptism. In the Church itself we are in that sacred space where we are all children of God whose lives are the Lord’s. This extends to and is highlighted in the very beginning of a funeral, the Mass of Resurrection, when we recall the deceased’s baptism. At that point—as in every Mass—the focus is on what St. Paul rightly proclaims: “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7-8; see, too, 2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 2:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:10).

In addition, our identity as a child of God is our most fundamental identity; again, the powerful preaching of St. Paul reminds us of this: “For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendant, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29; see, too, Colossians 2:10; note as well Galatians 3:2—we are “heirs” of Abraham not according to nationality or ethnicity, but according to faith). So when we come into the Church and recall that we have been claimed by and baptized into Christ—crucified, died, buried, resurrected, ascended and will return in glory—**nothing else matters**, not race, not nationality, not ethnicity, not gender, not social or economic standing.

With that biblical background, it is also important to note that **nowhere at all** in the liturgical books is there a provision for the use of any national or civic symbol (such as a flag, emblem, etc.) as part of the Mass—its procession, its decoration, etc. This makes perfect sense, because in the Mass—daily, Sunday, for a wedding, for a funeral—we are putting all our hopes in what God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has done, is doing, and will do for all of God’s people. There is our hope as the Body of Christ, the Church, and of each of us, members of the Church. We are **worshipping God**, we are not patting ourselves or others on the back for anything we’ve done, any secular group(s) we belong to, or nationality into which we were born or naturalized. We are celebrating that we have been “born from above” (words of Jesus in John 3:3; Nicode-

mus gets it wrong by saying “born again” in v. 4). We are celebrating how the Holy Spirit left to the Church by our risen Lord is at work in us and others by virtue of our life in Christ, our baptism, our being born from above.

This does not mean, of course, that we can not pray for the needs of our nation and her leaders. This does not mean that we may not to be grateful for those who have served our nation honorably in branches of the military, in public office, in police or fire departments, etc. In the Mass, however, we pick up the cross—the processional cross—and gather in sacred space. We should probably be taking off our shoes, for we are on **sacred ground** (cf. Exodus 3:5); we certainly should not be bringing secular symbols onto this sacred ground and into the sacred Mass.

More specifically on funerals, the funeral Mass is not “a celebration of life”, unless we mean it is the celebration of the eternal life won by Christ Jesus, our Lord, and into which we have been baptized! The visitation—the night before and/or in the narthex (entryway) of the Church prior to the Mass of Resurrection—is a time to celebrate the person’s life. Items significant to her/his life may be displayed, including, if the family wishes, the Stars and Stripes. These items and the memories they evoke are important and are to be treasured. Then, however, when we enter the Church and bring the deceased into the Church for the last time; all focus, as noted above, is on her/his life in Christ, begun in baptism, and points us to our ultimate hope, namely, to share in Christ’s resurrection: “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:4; see, too, Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12).

For veterans, as noted above, items specific to her/his service to our nation may be displayed in the narthex of the Church. After the Mass of Resurrection, the casket may be draped with the flag in the narthex, and then carried to the hearse and transported to the deceased’s place of rest. There the military honors may be done either before or after the graveside committal service. The military rites and the committal rites are **distinct rites**. It would be wrong for me to insist that Catholic symbols be employed in the midst of the rite of military honors. The reverse would also be wrong. — Note, too, according to the American Legion’s own “Officer’s Guide and Manual of Ceremonies” (legion.org/documents/pdf/pogsection1_01.pdf), they may provide American Legion funeral services, if requested, but **nowhere** does it call for the procession or presence of the flag (American or Legion) within a Church funeral. For a beautiful description of the Legion’s graveside military honors see, e.g., mysendoff.com/2013/10/the-american-legion-memorial-service/.

From what the biblical texts teach us (more than the above could be cited), from the liturgical texts, and from what the Mass of the Resurrection is truly about, I simply am not permitted to allow non-Christian symbols, such as national flags, civic emblems or banners, etc., to be part of a funeral Mass. I don’t know why other priests allow this—ask them. If they, or anyone else, can show where I have erred in the biblical, theological and liturgical points I have made here, I would admit my error and change.

Yours in Christ Jesus, our Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy A. Friedrichsen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. Timothy A. Friedrichsen, Pastor