

Lesson 2

Entrance Procession

Last week we began our liturgy lessons describing what we see when we enter a Catholic church. When we first enter through the door our attention is almost immediately drawn to the altar. The altar is the central focus of attention because it's where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass takes place. Before we go to our pew we dip our finger into the holy water font and make the sign of the cross recalling our baptism. When we get to our pew and before entering it, we genuflect to the Blessed Sacrament or if the Tabernacle isn't present, bow to the altar before we sit or kneel down. Next the music begins and the priest, deacon and any altar servers begin the procession to the altar.

Action

In the most formal entrance procession to the altar the ministers are lined up in a certain prescribed order. First there is the thurifer — a server who carries the thurible (the device that holds the lighted incense), then the cross bearer, candle bearers, deacon who carries the Book of the Gospels and finally the priest celebrant at the very end.

As they process to the altar a hymn is sung by everyone in church. The act of singing brings everyone together and helps us focus our attention on what is about to occur.

In less formal settings the procession may include only the cross bearer, deacon who carries the Book of the Gospels and the priest celebrant at the end. Sometimes, the priest celebrant may process to the altar alone.

When the procession reaches the entrance to the sanctuary, those who are not carrying anything bow deeply or if the tabernacle is in the sanctuary, genuflect. The deacon then reverently places the Book of the Gospels on the altar.

History

As early as 701 AD, bishops and priests in Rome used the entrance procession simply as a way to get to the altar. They used it for several reasons.

First of all, because churches were becoming much larger they needed an orderly method to get from the entrance of the church to the altar. Secondly, and very importantly, the procession came to be understood as symbolic of the people of God being lead by Christ into the banquet of Heaven. And finally, the procession provides time to bring the people together into a unified group of worshippers.

In the early church instead of a hymn being sung to unify the assembly, a psalm with an antiphon was sung by the people. Later, more popular hymns were composed that gradually replaced the psalm--though the psalm still may be used. In 2002 the (new) Instruction of the Roman Missal required that a cross bearing the likeness of the crucified Christ (in other words a crucifix) be carried in procession.

How to become more involved in the Action

Keep in mind the more spiritual and psychological purposes for the procession: to unify the group of people into an assembly of worshippers and Christ leading us into the banquet of heaven.

Hymns that are sung together psychologically bring the singers together into a single unified group of people. All of us know how the beauty of a song can help raise our hearts of God. Therefore sing, even if you think you sing badly or are embarrassed.

In this regard, it's also important to understand that we are saved not just as individuals but as a unified whole, the Church; the body of Christ on earth. As a Church we help in the salvation of those around us. Remember, too, that the procession is representing you and your loved ones walking together into heaven. Keep this in mind and the procession will become less of a way for the priest to get into the sanctuary but more of a spiritual experience where you are being lead to a fuller participation in the Mass with your brothers and sisters in the parish.