



Catechesis on the Altar Rail

December 30, 2018

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Kneeling is a supreme act of submission, and therefore reverence, to a higher power. When we bend the knee of our body, it is an outward sign that we have already bent the knee of our heart, our will, and our intellect. The act of faith requires such a submission of the will and intellect (in Latin, *obsequium religiosum intellectus et voluntatis*). Kneeling, therefore, is the supreme way of saying, "I believe." Now for millennia, the act of kneeling accompanied the moment of reception of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. To exercise this gesture, which naturally would take place at the altar, the altar was, in a sense, extended to the faithful by means of the altar rail. In that way, the altar rail becomes the people's altar.

We are accustomed, as Catholics, to kneel at the Consecration and before and after receiving Holy Communion. However, for the past fifty years, for mostly logistical purposes, Catholics have been taught to stand for the moment of actual reception of Holy Communion. At worst, many have been told it was even wrong to kneel at Holy Communion. Such was the poor catechesis and explanation of the liturgical changes of the 1960s and 70s. Study after study have shown how Eucharistic piety, reverence, and respect, not to even mention actual belief in the Real Presence, has steadily eroded to the point that a large percentage of people receiving Holy Communion today do not actually believe they are receiving the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. In many instances, I have had firsthand experience of people coming to Holy Communion without first discerning the Body and Blood, evident because of their obvious disregard for what it is they are doing. The big pastoral question we have in our age is: how do we tell people the good news that this really is Jesus' Body and Blood? How do we make a bold statement of an audacious claim of faith? I think the answer is the reintroduction of the altar rail, giving people the opportunity to express, even with their bodies, the faith which the Catholic Church believes. It is a radical gesture, for sure; it will take people off-guard and maybe even make some uncomfortable. Good! If it helps them to discern the Body and the Blood of Christ, as St. Paul reminds us (1Corinthians 11:29), it is worth the effort.

A new opportunity is presenting itself because of our newly renovated sanctuary. Many people donated specifically for an altar rail during the HOME Campaign, and it was one of the leading motivators for our sanctuary renovation indicated in our Town Hall meeting in the summer of 2014. As our sanctuary renovation has progressed, many people have expressed to me their anticipation for using the rail that they had helped to fund. However, mindful of the Bishop's directives and to prevent any misunderstanding and provide balance, I am offering the following as a way to reintroduce the parish to its use. At the 5:30 and 9 am Masses, there will be no change to the reception of Holy Communion that has become the norm, except that we will distribute Communion **over** the rail, giving people the option to kneel in line without difficulty (which many already do, even without a rail to lean upon). Only at the 11:30 Mass will we utilize the altar rail in the traditional manner (the priest moving from person to person). Even here, the instruction that will be given to the people is that they have the option, still, to stand or kneel when receiving the Body of the Lord. No one will be required to kneel. Furthermore, no one should be judged for not kneeling. *Holy Communion is not a time to judge your neighbor!* Some people's bodies prevent them from kneeling due to old age, injury, or other incapacities. However, EVERYONE should bend the knee of his or her HEART before such a great Mystery, whether or not one's body can follow. The Precious Blood will also be offered at all weekend Masses in front of the two side altars, allowing for reception either standing or kneeling.

Overcoming the inertia of the past fifty years will be difficult. There will be people who do not understand and visitors who have not been informed. This practice is meant to be catechetical and evangelical, not punitive or judgmental. Our aim in restoring and utilizing our new altar rail is to highlight our faith in the Real Presence, which is the very charity of Christ for us.