

From the Pastor 070713 – the Mass – Introductory Rites

Dear Friends,

Today I am continuing my once-a-month column on liturgy. Usually, I will be doing this on the first weekend of every month. In June, I began this series of columns on the Mass. My intention is to work our way through each piece of the Mass, from beginning to end. My hope is that this will enhance our appreciation and understanding of this wonderful gift that Jesus has given us.

Last month I began with the Introductory Rites – the first of the four parts of the Mass. We reflected on the Gathering Song, the procession, the processional cross or crucifix, the candles, the Book of the Gospels and the placement of that Book on the altar. Today we pick up from there.

Genuflecting and Bowing. In most Catholic churches, the tabernacle is clearly visible in the sanctuary. Our tradition is to genuflect when we enter and then again when we leave the church to show reverence for the Eucharistic presence of Christ in the tabernacle. By the way, to genuflect means to bend the knee, usually the right knee, to the point that it touches the floor or ground. The servers carrying the processional cross and candles and the deacon carrying the Book of the Gospels are not to genuflect, but the priest is to do this if able to do so. If the priest and for that matter all of us are unable to genuflect, we are to bow to show reverence. During the Mass, our rubrics call us to bow to the altar whenever we walk past it. We genuflect to the tabernacle only when we enter or leave the church.

Veneration of the Altar. You notice that the priest and deacon, when they arrive in the sanctuary, also bow and kiss the altar. At least from the fourth century, the altar has been seen as a symbol of Christ. Saint Ambrose (d. 397) says that “*The altar represents the Body of Christ and the Body of Christ is on the altar.*” The priest and deacon, on behalf of all present, venerate the altar in this additional way as a sign of the special reverence it deserves.

The Sign of the Cross. We always begin Mass, as we begin most of our prayer, with the Sign of the Cross. The Sign of the Cross is, in effect, a blessing of oneself. Historical evidence tells us that this goes back as far as the year 220 with one of the early Christian theologians, Tertullian, speaking of the value of this signing. Originally this was a tracing of the cross on one’s forehead. Then, probably by the fourth century, it became what we now know – making the cross on our body with the tips of our fingers touching our forehead as we say “*In the name of the Father,*” then touching our chest as we say “*and of the Son,*” then touching our left shoulder as we say “*and of the Holy Spirit,*” and finally touching our right shoulder as we say *Amen.*” The Eastern rites of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches make the Sign of the Cross a bit differently from us, but the idea is the same. The use of the Sign of the Cross has been in place at the beginning of Mass since the fourteenth century. In this one sign with its wording, we affirm two absolutely fundamental mysteries of our faith: God as Trinity and the cross as the source of salvation and new life.

I will continue with these reflections about the Mass in my column for the first weekend of August. Meanwhile, if you want to review my June 2 column on the Mass (or, for that matter, any past columns), just go to the parish website at www.stmargaret.org. I hope each of you has some restful days this summer.

Father Mike