

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

(In the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist)

It has been said, “When you become an Episcopalian, you do not have to trade in your brain.” The same mentality can be applied to what we do in Church. There is no one “authentic” way to worship. Ultimately, God is most concerned with our hearts; our faith is more important than whether or not we make the sign of the cross at the “right” time. Therefore, we must not approach ritual and ceremony from the perspective of uniformity, but rather from a position of why we do it (universal) and what its significance is for us (personal). For example, a person may very well know exactly what to do ceremonially, but if there is no faith or belief behind the action, then it is merely an external expression. Conversely, one may not have a clue as to what to do in terms of ceremony, but may have a heart, which is bursting with love for Christ. The Pharisees knew what to do, but Christ’s concern with them was that they did not live it. They wore the right ritual clothes, but their lives did not reflect the Faith.

Therefore, before we can approach the issue of *why we do what we do*, we need to have an examination of heart. The real *why we do what we do* is to be a true reflection of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

What We Do When We Enter The Church

Generally, the very first thing we discover is the *baptismal font* or a *holy water stoup*. In the early days of the Church, in colder climates where baptism in the river became exceptional, baptistries were installed. Sometimes they were buildings over a well or a stream, but generally, in smaller churches, the baptistry was merely an area near the entrance of the church where the font was located. Therefore, it was the water of baptism which we first encountered as we entered the church. Later, when there was more than one door, little fonts called holy water stoups were installed, at each door. It became the custom of Christians to dip their fingers in the water of baptism, which was kept in the font or stoups, and make the sign of the

cross. The earliest custom was to dip the thumb in the water and trace the sign of the cross on the forehead where the priest had traced the cross on the person at baptism. Later, it became the custom to make the full sign of the cross. No matter which way it is done, it reminds us that before we can enter the Church, we must encounter the water of baptism – new life in Jesus Christ.

What We Do When We Reach the Pew

In most Episcopal churches, the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a repository called an *aumbry* or a *tabernacle*. A tabernacle is either on the altar (if the altar is against the wall) or in the east wall (behind the altar if it is free-standing). An aumbry is usually in the north wall. (“Liturgical East” is the direction that the congregation faces). Near the tabernacle or aumbry is a candle called the *sanctuary light* or *sanctuary candle*. Technically, it is to be either an oil lamp or a wax candle of at least 51 % beeswax. (That which is used in the sanctuary—the area behind the altar rail—is to be of “natural” material, fiber or composition, since this is the “Holy of Holies”, so to speak.) The glass around the candle is to be clear or white due to the fact that white (purity) is the color used in conjunction with the Blessed Sacrament.

It is the belief of Anglicans that Jesus Christ is present in the Blessed Sacrament. Thus, when we enter our pew, we acknowledge His presence. That, by the way, is one of the reasons we do not carry on idle conversations in Church. The other reason is so that we, and others might be able to pray in quietness. The ways in which we have acknowledged the Lord's presence in the Sacrament have varied over the years. Those in the Eastern Rites bow profoundly and make the sign of the cross, while those in most Western Rites, (including Anglicans), drop to the right knee (genuflect). As in the days gone by, people curtsied and/or dropped to the knee in the presence of the king or queen. So, too, do we acknowledge the presence of the King of kings. Physical limitations, however, can restrict our mobility, and we must remember that the posture of our hearts is what is most important. In some Anglican churches, the Sacrament is not reserved, and thus a bow is made to the altar, for it is on the altar that Christ will become present in the Eucharist. After reverencing the Sacrament (or altar), we then kneel to pray, to collect our thoughts, and to prepare for

the great event which shall soon occur—the coming of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament. *We adore Thee, hidden in forms of bread and wine*

What We Do When the Procession Begins

The purpose of having a bell ring immediately before we have the Procession is to “get us to our feet”. This is much nicer than shouting, “Okay. Stand up!” It also helps us avoid confusion about when to stand. Not too many years ago, whenever a lady entered the room, gentlemen stood; whenever a member of the clergy entered the room, the people stood. Apart from the respect shown for those in the procession, we stand to sing, and we also stand to acknowledge the cross. When the processional cross passes us, we bow our heads out of respect for what the cross symbolizes—our Lord's death for us. The Liturgy then begins as the celebrant reaches his chair. We make the sign of the cross, with the opening acclamation, as a way to begin the Liturgy, (we end the Liturgy in the same way), and also to profess our belief in the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

At various points in what follows (the Kyrie/Gloria, Collect for the Day, etc.), whenever we say or hear the name of Jesus, we bow our heads out of respect for the Most Holy Name. This is in accordance with the Scriptural admonition: “At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow”. Contrary to what some have been taught, we do not kneel for the Collect of the Day, even though, for some, there is a “knee-jerk reaction” to hearing “Let us pray”. The reason for remaining standing is that the Collect for the Day is the conclusion of the Entrance Rite, and standing is the posture for the Entrance Rite.

During the Liturgy of the Word, we sit for the Old Testament Lesson, Psalm, and Epistle. The response to the lessons, (“Thanks be to God”), is our way of giving thanks for the wisdom and teaching which is imparted. When there is a gradual hymn, or sung Alleluia verse, we stand in preparation for the reading of the Gospel. If there is no gradual, we stand immediately after we make the response to the Epistle. Generally, at Low Mass (Mass without hymns), the Gospel is read at the ambo (pulpit), or sometimes from the center. The Word of our God shall stand forever.

The Gospel is the word of Jesus, so we stand out of respect. When the Gospel is announced, we may make three signs of the cross: one on our forehead, one on our lips, and one on our heart. The reason for this is so that we may remember that the Gospel must be understood (head), proclaimed (lips), and believed (heart). The most ancient way of making the sign of the cross on oneself is the one we use here; the thumb tracing the cross on the forehead. This would indicate that this way of honoring the Gospel has very ancient roots.

The Sermon

Historically, the sermon has been a critical part of the Liturgy because it is an explanation of the readings. It is clear that preaching was an important part of our Lord's earthly ministry. Our Lord understood a most important spiritual principle: The ears are connected to the heart. What Jesus constantly asks for is a change of heart. To this end, “active listening” is essential. In virtually every sermon, God plants an idea that can change a heart. In this visually oriented world of ours, there has been a reduction in aural attentiveness. Misunderstanding is often a by-product of poor listening skills. Sitting for the sermon has been a normative posture, but even to this day, in some Eastern Rite churches, where there are no pews or seats, the people stand or sit on the floor. The expression “I sat at Professor So-and-so's feet” refers to this early practice of sitting on the floor near the speaker. *Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God*

The Nicene Creed and the Prayers of the People

During the Creed, as in all parts of the Liturgy, we bow our heads at the Name of Jesus. We also either genuflect or bow deeply at the words “and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man.” Bowing or genuflecting at the *Incarnatus est* is an ancient tradition whereby we humble ourselves in acknowledgment of how Jesus humbled Himself by taking on human flesh. We also make the sign of the cross at the end of the Creed. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Our current *Book of Common Prayer* gives us seven different Prayers of the People; one in Rite I, and six that can be used at either Rite I or Rite II. Forms 1 and 2 are suited to Rite I, and Forms 2 – 6 to Rite II. There are no specific manual acts in the prayers, except that, again, at the Name of Jesus we bow our heads, and when we mention the departed, we make the sign of the cross (“May they rest in peace.”).

It is not appropriate historically to kneel for the Prayers of the People for several reasons. First of all, these prayers were originally used as a processional hymn — part of the Entrance Rite. Furthermore, in Rite I, in the longer exhortation for Confession, we have the words “...make your humble confession unto Almighty God devoutly kneeling”. It would be odd to say such a thing if we were already kneeling! This is the time, however, to make our own intentions known, either by having written our intentions in the Intercession Book prior to the Liturgy, or by stating silently, or aloud, our needs and the needs of others.

The Confession, Absolution, and Peace

Anglicanism is the only branch of the Historic Church, which has the Confession at this point in the Liturgy. The reason is a Biblical one: Before we can go to the altar we must first be reconciled with God and our neighbors.

The invitation to confession bids us to kneel, for we must approach God's mercy in a spirit of penitence. We may also bow our heads, and we may even “beat our breasts” as the Bible says, at the words “thought, word and deed”. This action is an act of penitence. When the Bishop or priest grants absolution, we respond by making the sign of the cross.

Upon being forgiven in a spirit of joy, and in some cases relief, we celebrate our reconciliation by participating in one of the most ancient parts of the Liturgy—the great *Shalom*— the Peace. This is exchanged in a variety of ways from a nod of the head to a smile, a handshake, an embrace, or a kiss. (At one time this action was called the “Kiss of Peace”, for this is the common exchange, even to this day, among Semitic people). *First, be reconciled to your brother. Then come*

The Offertory

One of the most ancient actions in the Liturgy is the offering by the people of the bread, the wine, and the water. People took a turn at providing what was needed. It was very much like coffee hour in a parish today! Generally, the custom is for a man, a woman and a child to process, because generally, men made the wine, women baked the bread, and children drew the water.

If an anthem is sung by the choir, it is acceptable to sit, otherwise, it is customary to stand as we offer, with the priest, the bread and the wine (mixed with water). The only other posture for the worshiper during the Offertory is a grateful heart, for during the Offertory we offer ourselves and symbols of our labor.

The primary emphasis of the Offertory is not the alms (money), but rather the *oblations* (bread and wine), for the Offertory is where we witness the beginning of the great transformation, which will soon take place. *With them, we offer ourselves*

The Great Thanksgiving

The Great Thanksgiving: *Sursum Corda, Sanctus and Benedictus*

In the course of the Liturgy, there are more ceremonies, rituals, and manual actions in the Great Thanksgiving than in any other section.

At the start of the Great Thanksgiving, the priest “talks with his hands”. He offers an invitation, as he extends his hands with, “The Lord be with you”, and he joins his hands as we respond to him, “And also with you”. He then lifts up his hands and arms as he asks us to “Lift up your hearts”, and he bows his head with joined hands in gratitude as he says, “Let us give thanks.” He maintains this posture as we say, “It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”

In a prayer posture, the priest says or sings the preface (seasonal or thematic prayer), and then all of us join in singing a hymn with everyone in Church and everyone in Heaven—“Holy, Holy, Holy.” We bow for the *Sanctus* because it is as if heaven and earth are merged, and we are overwhelmed. The bells ring three times to remind us to be attentive, and that this is one of the holiest times in the Liturgy.

We then raise our heads at “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”, because Jesus is coming soon in the Sacrament, and we don't want to miss him! The sign of the cross is made at the end of the *Sanctus* and before the *Benedictus* as at the end of every great prayer.

The Eucharistic Prayer

The most solemn part of our Liturgy is the Eucharistic Prayer. In the course of this prayer, our Lord makes Himself particularly present under the species of bread and wine. Therefore, the ceremonial actions for this prayer are most elaborate. Generally speaking, we kneel for this prayer, although standing was the prevailing posture prior to the Mediæval Period. In fact, one act at the Council of Nicea forbade kneeling during the Easter season.

Nonetheless, the general tradition has been to bow our heads for the words of Institution, “Take, eat...”, and then raise our heads and adore when the celebrant elevates the host, and then again when he elevates the chalice. One tradition recommends the worshiper silently say, “My Lord and my God,” at the elevations, just as St. Thomas did when he beheld our Lord after the Resurrection. In the course of this prayer, we see the celebrant do a variety of manual actions, which emphasize the prayer's importance. Generally the celebrant elevates the host and chalice, and at the end of the prayer lifts up both host and chalice together, as we respond, “AMEN!”

By Him, and with Him, and in Him ... all honor and glory is Yours

Communion

The Breaking of the Bread carries with it a two-fold expression: (1) We functionally break the bread for distribution (we are one body, yet many members); and (2) we remember that Christ's body was broken for us at Calvary. We focus on his Body and Blood, and when the celebrant lifts the host and the chalice and says “The gifts of God for people of God”, we may wish to make the sign of the cross as a way of accepting this great gift.

When the bell rings signaling that it is time to come forward for Communion, we genuflect as we leave our pew. In this way, we acknowledge that we are approaching the Throne of God, Christ the

King. When we kneel at the altar rail we make the sign of the cross, and when the celebrant says, “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven”, we say, “Amen.” This comes from the very early liturgies of the Church, and is our way of affirming our belief that this is, in fact, His Body. When the chalice passes, we do the same thing.

One may receive the host on the right hand (with the left hand under the right), or the host may be received on the tongue. When receiving the chalice, it is appropriate to guide it with the right hand, so that the person administering the chalice will know if you have received the Sacred Blood.

Before leaving the altar rail we make the sign of the cross again. This time we do not bow or genuflect on our way back to the pew, because we are carrying the Body and Blood of Christ in us. When we return to our pew we kneel in thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving, Blessing, Dismissal

What can one possibly say after having received our Lord's gift of Himself? “Thank you” is not enough, but we need to thank God. We either stand or kneel for the Thanksgiving after having taken a few moments to make our own personal act of Thanksgiving.

After the Thanksgiving (or Post Communion Prayer), the celebrant may give us a blessing. If the celebrant is a Bishop, then the Blessing is given by the Bishop. Traditionally the bishop's blessing involves several versicles and responses prior to the actual blessing. Then, traditionally the bishop blesses the people three times: to his left, the center, and to his right. As we receive the Blessing, we make the sign of the cross.

Originally, only bishops gave the Blessing, but now it is usual for priests to confer the Blessing also (yet it is optional in Rite II of the *Book of Common Prayer*). When it is time for the Dismissal, (which is done by the deacon, or in his absence, the celebrant), we stand and respond “Thanks be to God”.

It is appropriate not to leave until the procession passes us. We bow to the processional cross. If the celebrant is a bishop we may, out of respect for his office, kneel on our left knee as he blesses us. If the celebrant is a priest we may slightly bow our heads. We may wish to

kneel for a moment to say a final prayer; however, this is not done in order to watch the candles being extinguished. We now leave the nave and may once again dip our fingers into the baptismal font as we leave. *Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift. I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord!"*

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