

Liturgy and Life – May 2019 – Holy Week and More – Part I

Here is the next installment of my the “Liturgy and Life” series. If you are curious about any liturgical questions or customs, please contact me at the parish office or by email.

Last month we celebrated Holy Week. As I have implemented a few more of the traditional practices for those celebrations, my “sources” tell me that several people have asked about them. For example, why did I take off my shoes at the Good Friday liturgy of the Passion?

First, some general background: All of the Masses and special liturgies of the Church are contained in an instruction book called the Roman Missal. (It’s the big red book you see me reading from at Mass). That missal has both the words the priest says, but also the “rubrics,” instructions printed in red telling the priest what to do. This book hasn’t changed that all much in the 50 years or so since the Church revised the Mass and the liturgy. It has been tweaked here and there, especially in 2011 when it was re-translated from the original Latin.

The book usually just lists the actions; it doesn’t give the history or meaning behind them. That is something that the liturgists and scholars of the sacraments teach seminarians.

It does label a lot of things as optional, so the priest celebrant can decide whether to do it or not. I am a “by the book” kind of a guy, so do most of the options. Many of them are ancient practices chock full of important symbolism developed over the centuries. But the truth is that a lot of the things I am doing are not new; they have always been in the instruction book. Unfortunately, a lot of priests in the period between about 1970 and 2000 simply ignored those instructions. That has caused a lot of harm in the church, but I’ll save that topic for a later date.

On to the particulars: At Good Friday, the missal instruction expresses a preference for the priest to take off his shoes before he removes his chasuble (outer Mass robe) as he prostrates himself (lies down face flat) in front of the altar. In Sacred Scripture and ancient biblical culture, that is a sign that someone is on holy ground. For example, when Moses approached the presence of God in the burning bush, the Lord tells him “Don’t come any closer, take off your shoes, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” (Exodus 3) Moses complies and also “hid his face because he was afraid to look upon God.”

As priests celebrating Good Friday, we take off our chasuble (a symbol of our priesthood) revealing that we too are sinful men, like all the faithful whom we are privileged to shepherd, before God’s Cross. As we kneel before the Cross, we are on the most sacred of sacred grounds: Cavalry, where the Son of God surrendered His life in sacrifice for us so that we could be saved from eternal damnation. We hide our face like Moses, almost fearful to gaze on the intensely beautiful yet terrible love of the Cross and the face of Christ crucified. As we remember Jesus offering His Body and Blood on the Cross to us for the sake of our salvation, we prostrate ourselves in adoration, just as did the Magi at Jesus’ birth, when they first recognized Him as the Son of God in the flesh. “We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.”