

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 16 – “Mysteries of the Sacristy” Revealed!

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

Mysteries of the sacristy revealed! That's intended as a joke. Seminarians joke about “sacristy rats” – those with an obsessive and excessive interest in the ritual minutiae of worship: when to cross yourself and when not, exactly how to position vessels on the Altar, what such and such a vestment symbolizes. When we first envisioned this series of bulletin cover essays, we had a list of “mysteries of the sacristy” that we thought people might like to have explained. (Mystery #1: “sacristy” is the room back behind the worship space where stuff gets prepared for the service. Mystery #2: “narthex” is the vestibule you enter coming through the front door of the church. Now you know!) We're going to reveal some of these sacristy rat mysteries in the bulletin essays today and next week, but with a caveat: they are not important in themselves; the important thing is your experience in worship. If, for instance, the priest's gesture at a point in the eucharistic prayer does not speak for itself, he should probably not be doing it. The liturgy is a form of communication, not a magic act. It should speak clearly and boldly, not weirdly and incomprehensively. With that observation, here goes:

Posture. In the Episcopal Church people are free to practice whatever piety feels right to them. You can stand or sit or kneel. The old rule was “sit to listen, stand to praise, kneel to pray.” The emphasis in the reforms of the 1979 Prayer Book is on standing, especially to pray. That is because kneeling to pray was a late, medieval innovation probably triggered by belief that the Black Death was a punishment for sin. Standing is preferred because in Christ we are forgiven; he has “made us worthy to stand before him” (Eucharistic Prayer B). Standing also emphasizes the communal nature of the Eucharist.

The sign of the Cross. Like posture in worship, making the sign of the Cross is a way of engaging our body, not just our brain, in worship. Do it if it helps you, don't if it doesn't. Forget the whole Protestant/Catholic, low church/high church stuff. Key times to cross yourself: at the Opening Acclamation, at the Absolution, at the Great Elevation when the Presider holds up the Body and Blood and we all say Amen. To cross yourself, move your right hand to touch your forehead, your heart, your left shoulder, your right shoulder.

Bowing. A sign of reverence, to be used before the Altar, at the Cross in the entry or retiring procession.

Raising the arms in prayer. An ancient practice, called the orans, meaning prayer, position; again do it if it helps you share the Spirit. A variant, if you want something less bold, is simply to hold your arms out as though you were offering someone a gift – which is what you are doing, isn't it, when you pray.