

Tridentine Community News

March 5, 2006

Veiling the Sacred – Part 2

The Priest's Posture During the Consecration

The ancient curtain around the altar that was mentioned last week may have fallen into disuse, but even today, the Tridentine rubrics specifically instruct the celebrant to whisper the words of consecration while inclining over the bread and wine. He is protecting or veiling the elements from the profane world during this most sacred moment. The use of the Latin language protects against the temptation to personalize the words of the Mass; it sets apart the prayers of the Mass as something unique and holy.

The Chalice Veil

At all Tridentine Masses, and at some Novus Ordo Masses, the chalice is covered by a veil before and after being used in the Holy Mass. This veiling serves three purposes: First, to remind us that this sacred vessel is a container for the Precious Blood; second, to cause us not to pay particular attention to the often beautiful metal craftwork until the chalice is being used for its primary function; and third, to protect the chalice from dust and dirt so that it may be as clean and pure as possible when holding the Precious Blood.

If a ciborium is present on the altar, with extra hosts to be consecrated, it, too, is typically covered with a veil for the same reasons.

The Tabernacle Veil

The Holy Eucharist itself is reserved behind the solid doors of a tabernacle. Some churches take the concept one step further by covering the front of the tabernacle with a veil, to protect the reserved Blessed Sacrament from being visible even when the tabernacle door is opened. This veil is a literal, as well as symbolic, veiling of the sacred species, in effect a recreation of the curtain at the Temple in Jerusalem that sealed off the Ark of the Covenant.

Kneeling for Holy Communion

In the Tridentine order of Mass, the posture for receiving Holy Communion is kneeling. If our Lord were standing in

front of you, you would want to show Him your utmost respect, as he is your God. One bows before meeting the Queen of England. One would presumably kneel before meeting our Lord. At Holy Communion, you are indeed meeting our Lord. Receiving Communion while kneeling is an appropriate acknowledgement of His Real Presence.

At some communion rails, including the one at St. Josaphat, the rail is fitted with a "Communion Cloth", a piece of fabric that is flipped over the rail before Holy Communion is distributed. This cloth serves two purposes: On a practical level, like the paten, it serves to protect against accidental dropping of a Host, by making the Host more visible against the white cloth. It also encourages the faithful to place their hands under the cloth while waiting

for, and during the reception of, Holy Communion. Concealing one's hands is a form of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, essentially veiling our unclean selves from this Most Precious Gift.

Hand Coverings

At Benediction and during Eucharistic Processions, the priest puts a humeral veil over his shoulders and hands before picking up the Blessed

Sacrament in the monstrance. He is veiling his imperfect body before conducting a sacred action with Our Perfect Lord.

By veiling, or setting apart, those most sacred aspects of our Holy Catholic Liturgy, we form our perspectives properly about our role as His creatures. We avoid the all-too-common tendency to trivialize the sacred. The sanctuary is not a stage. Mass is not a performance. Holy Communion is not the distribution of a symbol, but of a Sacred Reality. Modern church design has often ignored the symbolic value and benefit of veiling. Just making a sanctuary floor higher than the rest of the seating area does not fully convey the significance of the Holy Action that takes place there. Tearing down a communion rail simply because it may no longer be mandated for the distribution of Holy Communion ignores its symbolic function of distinguishing the more sacred part of the church.

Learning our Holy Faith and developing devotion to it is a lifelong challenge. Proper sacred architecture can assist by enveloping our minds in recognition of the sacred.

