

JOHN BURKE

REASONABLENESS OF
CATHOLIC CEREMONIES
AND PRACTICES

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Ceremonies and Practices**

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John J. Burke

Reasonableness of Catholic Ceremonies and Practices

"Let the children of Israel make the Phase in due time.. according to all the ceremonies thereof" (Num. ix 2, 3).

"The priest shall be vested with the tunic" (Lev. vi. 10).

"And he made, of violet and purple, scarlet and fine linen, the vestments for Aaron to wear when he ministered in the holy places, as the Lord commanded Moses" (Ex. xxxix. 1).

"In every place there is sacrifice and there is offered to My name a clean offering" (Malach. i. 11).

"And another Angel came and stood before the altar, having a golden censer: and there was given to him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar, which is before the throne of God" (Apoc. viii. 3).

The Ceremonies of the Catholic Church

THE Catholic Church in the celebration of Mass and in the administration of the sacraments employs certain forms and rites. These are called ceremonies. By these ceremonies the Church wishes to appeal to the heart as well as to the intellect, and to impress the faithful with sentiments of faith and piety.

What is more capable of raising the heart and mind of man to God than a priest celebrating Mass? What more inspiring than some of our sacred music?

How beneficial and how lasting the impression formed by the ceremonies of the Church, the following incident will show:

One of our missionaries once went to visit a tribe of Indians who had been deprived of a priest for nearly half a century. After traveling through the forest for some days he came near their village.

'Twas Sunday morning. Suddenly the silence was broken by a number of voices singing in unison. He stopped to listen. To his great astonishment he distinguished the music of a Mass, and of Catholic hymns well known to him.

What could be more touching than this simple, savage people endeavoring to celebrate the Lord's Day as they had been taught by the priest fifty years before? What more elevating than those sacred songs – the *Stabat Mater*, the *O Salutaris*, or the *Te Deum*– uttered by pious lips and resounding through the forest primeval? What better evidence could we have of the beneficial effects of our ceremonies in raising the heart to God?

And yet few things connected with our holy religion have been more frequently subjected to ridicule than her ceremonies. People scoff at them, laugh at them, call them foolish and unreasonable. Those people do not stop to consider that by doing so they, themselves, are acting most unreasonably. For no reasonable person, no judge, will condemn another without hearing both sides of the question.

These wiseacres, however, flatter themselves that they know all about the Catholic Church and her ceremonies without hearing her side of the case. Hence the misunderstandings and misrepresentations regarding her that exist among well-meaning people.

If people would but learn to speak about that which they knew and understood; if they would accord to the Catholic Church the same treatment as to other institutions; if they would examine both sides of the question before criticising and ridiculing her teachings and her ceremonies; if they would but treat her with that openness, that fairness, that candor, that honesty characteristic of the American citizen when dealing with other questions – what a vast amount of ignorance, of prejudice, of sin would be avoided!

We claim that ceremonies used in the worship of God are reasonable, because they were sanctioned by God in the Old Testament and by Jesus Christ and His apostles in the New Law.

I. Ceremonies Necessary to Divine Worship

THE angels are pure spirits. They have no body. Consequently the worship they render God is spiritual, interior.

The heavenly bodies are not spiritual, but entirely material substances. They render God a sort of external worship according to the words of the prophet Daniel, "Sun and moon bless the Lord... stars of heaven bless the Lord. Praise and exalt Him forever." Man has a soul, a spiritual substance similar to the heavenly bodies. He should, therefore, honor God by the twofold form of worship, interior and exterior.

"God is a spirit; and they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth" (*John iv. 24*).

From these words of the beloved disciple we are not to conclude that interior worship is prescribed as the only essential, and exterior worship condemned. True piety must manifest itself externally. Man naturally manifests his feelings by outward signs and ceremonies.

The Catholic Church recognizes that man has a heart to be moved as well as an intellect to be enlightened. She enlightens the intellect by her good books, sermons, etc.; and she moves the heart by the grandeur of her ceremonies.

If any one doubts that God considers ceremonies necessary to divine worship, let him read the books of Leviticus and Exodus. Almost the whole of these books treats of the rites and ceremonies used by the then chosen people of God in their public worship.

The 26th, 27th, and 28th chapters of Exodus prescribe the form of the tabernacle and its appurtenances, the size of the altar and the oil for the lamps, and the holy vestments which Aaron and his sons were to wear during the performance of the public ceremonies.

The book of Leviticus treats more particularly of the sacrifices, rites, and ceremonies of the priests and Levites.

"And the Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of the testimony, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and thou shalt say to them: The man among you that shall offer to the Lord a sacrifice of the cattle, that is, offering victims of oxen and sheep, if his offering be a holocaust and of the herd, he shall offer a male, without blemish, at the door of the tabernacle of the testimony, to make the Lord favorable to him. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the victim, and it shall be acceptable and help to his expiation" (*Lev. i. 1 et seq.*).

After enumerating all the sacrifices and ceremonies, the sacred writer closes the book of Leviticus with the words, "These are the precepts which the Lord commanded Moses for the children of Israel in Mount Sinai," thus showing that He considers ceremonies necessary to divine worship.

The religion instituted by Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is more spiritual than that of the Old Law. Nevertheless He did not discard ceremonies. In the Garden of Gethsemani He fell upon His knees in humble supplication. He went in procession to Jerusalem preceded by a great multitude strewing palm-branches on the road and singing, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Before He cured the deaf and dumb man, He put His fingers into his ears and touched his tongue with spittle, and looking up to heaven He groaned and said, "Ephpheta," which is, "Be thou opened."

At the Last Supper He invoked a blessing on the bread and wine, and after the supper He chanted a hymn with His disciples – ceremonies similar to those used in the Mass. When He imparted the Holy Ghost to His apostles, He breathed upon them. In a similar way they and their successors communicated the Holy Ghost upon others by breathing upon them, laying their hands upon them and praying over them, when conferring the sacrament of Holy Orders.

St. James directs that if any man is sick he shall call in a priest of the Church, who shall anoint him with oil, as is done in the sacrament of Extreme Unction.

We must, therefore, admit that ceremonies used in the worship of God are reasonable, since they are sanctioned by God in the Old Law and by Jesus Christ and His apostles in the New Testament.

All these acts of Our Saviour – the prostration in the Garden, the procession to Jerusalem, the touching of the deaf man's ears, the chanting of the hymn, the laying on of hands, the anointing of the sick – are but so many ceremonies serving as models of the ceremonies used by the Catholic Church in her public worship and in the administration of her sacraments.

II. Vestments Used by the Priest at Mass

BEFORE entering upon an explanation of the ceremonies of the Mass, which is our principal act of public worship, let us examine the meaning of the vestments worn by the priest during the celebration of that august sacrifice. First, it is well to remember that these vestments come down to us from the time of the apostles, and have the weight of antiquity hanging upon them. Hence, if they did not demand our respect as memorials of Christ, they are at least deserving of attention on account of their antiquity.

The 28th chapter of Exodus tells us the sacred vestments God wished the priests of the Old Law to wear during the public worship. "And these shall be the vestments which they shall make: a rational and an ephod, a tunic and a straight linen garment, a mitre and a girdle. They shall make the holy vestments for thy brother Aaron and his sons, that they may do the office of priesthood unto Me." As God in the Old Law prescribed vestments for the priests, so the Church, guided by God, prescribes sacred vestments to be worn by the priest of the New Law while engaged in the sacred mysteries.

The long black garment which the priest wears around the church in all the sacred functions is called a *cassock*. Kings and officers of the army wear a special uniform when performing their public duties; priests wear *cassocks* and other special garments when performing their public duties. These vestments are used to excite the minds of the faithful to the contemplation of heavenly things.

Who, for example, can behold the cross on the chasuble the priest wears without thinking of all Christ suffered for us on the cross? As the priest in celebrating Mass represents the person of Christ, and the Mass represents His passion, the vestments he wears represent those with which Christ was clothed at the time of the passion.

The first vestment the priest puts on over the *cassock* is called an *amice*. It is made of linen, and reminds us of the veil that covered the face of Jesus when His persecutors struck Him. (*Luke* xxii. 64.)

When the priest puts on the *amice* he first places it on his head, thus recalling to mind the crown of thorns that pierced the head of Jesus.

The *alb* (from *albus*, white) represents the white garment with which Christ was vested by Herod when sent back to Pilate dressed as a fool. (*Luke* xxii. 11.)

White is emblematic of purity. Hence the wearer is reminded of that purity of mind and body which he should have who serves the altar of the Most High.

The *cincture*, or girdle, as well as the *maniple* and *stole*, represent the cords and bands with which Christ was bound in the different stages of His passion. St. Matthew says in the 22d verse of the 27th chapter, "They brought Him *bound* and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate, the governor."

The *chasuble*, or outer vestment the priest wears, represents the purple garment with which Christ was clothed as a mock king. "And they clothed Him with purple" (*Mark* xv. 17). Upon the back of the *chasuble* you see a cross. This represents the cross Christ bore on His sacred shoulders to Calvary, and upon which He was crucified.

In these vestments, that is, in the *chasuble*, *stole*, and *maniple*, the Church uses five colors – white, red, purple, green, and black.

White, which is symbolic of purity and innocence, is used on the feasts of Our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin, of the angels, and of the saints that were not martyrs.

Red, the symbol of fortitude, is used on the feast of Pentecost, of the Exaltation of the Cross, of the apostles and martyrs.

Purple, or violet (the color of penance), is used in Advent and Lent.

Green (the color of hope) is used on all Sundays when no special feast is celebrated, except the Sundays of Lent and Advent.

Black (the color of mourning) is used on Good Friday and during the celebration of Mass for the dead.

Thus we see that each vestment and color used has a special significance.

All are calculated to attract our attention, elevate our minds to God, and fill us with a desire to do something for Him Who has done so much for us – to at least keep His commandments.

One word about the use of Latin in the celebration of Mass will perhaps be appropriate here. History tells us that when Christianity was established the Roman Empire had control of nearly all of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Wherever the Roman flag floated to the breeze the Latin language was spoken, just as English is spoken where the sovereign of Great Britain or the President of the United States holds sway. The Church naturally adopted in her liturgy the language spoken by the people.

In the beginning of the fifth century vast hordes of barbarians began to come from the north of Europe and spread desolation over the fairest portions of the Roman Empire. Soon the Empire was broken up. New kingdoms began to be formed, new languages to be developed. The Latin finally ceased to be a living language. The Church retained it in her liturgy, 1st, because, as her doctrine and liturgy are unchangeable, she wishes the language of her doctrine and liturgy to be unchangeable; 2d, because, as the Church is spread over the whole world, embracing in her fold children of all climes, nations, and languages – as she is universal – she must have a universal language; 3d, because the Catholic clergy are in constant communication with the Holy See, and this requires a uniform language.

Besides, when a priest says Mass the people, by their English Missals or other prayer-books, are able to follow him from beginning to end.

The Mass is a sacrifice. The prayers of the Mass are offered to God. Hence when the priest says Mass he is speaking not to the people, but to God, to whom all languages are equally intelligible. Are not these sufficient reasons for the use of the Latin language? Are not good Catholics more attentive, more devout at Mass than others at their prayer-meetings? The good Catholic knows that the Mass represents the passion and death of Christ; that the passion and death of Christ are the sinner's only refuge, the just man's only hope; that it can not but be good and wholesome to turn our minds and our hearts toward this subject; that frequent meditation on Christ's passion will move us to avoid sin, which caused it; and that nothing can more efficaciously cause us to think of Christ's passion and death than the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

III. Ceremonies of the Mass

THE Mass is the great sacrifice of the New Law. It was foreshadowed by all the sacrifices ordained by God in the Old Law. They were shadows; it is the substance.

We learn from Genesis of the fall of man. Universal tradition, as well as Scripture, informs us that the creature formerly became guilty in the eyes of the Creator. All nations, all peoples, endeavored to appease the anger of Heaven and believed that a victim was necessary for this purpose. Hence sacrifices have been offered from the beginning of the human race.

Cain and Abel offered victims; the one the first fruits of the earth, the other the firstlings of the flock. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Melchisedech worshiped this way, and their worship was acceptable to God. Everywhere, even among the heathen, you find the altar, the priest, and the sacrifice. As we learn from Leviticus and other portions of the Old Testament, God Himself carefully prescribed the quality, manner, number, and place of the various sacrifices which He was pleased to accept from the hands of His chosen people. From this fact that sacrifice has ever formed a prominent feature in the worship of all people, we conclude that it belongs to the essentials of religion, and that Christians to-day should have an altar of which, as St. Paul says, "they can not eat who serve the tabernacle."

The sacrifices of the Old Law were provisional and prefigured the great sacrifice of the New Law foretold by the prophet Malachy. This glorious prophecy of Malachy, "From the rising of the sun even to the going down My name is great among the Gentiles; in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to My name a clean offering; for My name is great among the Gentiles, saith the Lord of Hosts" – this glorious prophecy is fulfilled only by the great sacrifice of the Catholic Church. We alone can say with St. Paul, "*Habemus altare*" "We have an altar" and a true sacrifice. Of all the blessings bequeathed by Jesus Christ to His Church, there is none better, none greater, none holier than the holy sacrifice of the Mass. It is the sacrifice of His own body and blood offered to the heavenly Father under the appearances of bread and wine. It was instituted by Our Lord at the Last Supper, when He took bread and wine in His sacred hands and blessed them, saying, "This is My body... This is My blood... Do this for a remembrance of Me."

He instituted the holy Mass in order to represent and continue the sacrifice of Calvary. St Paul says, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, xi. 26, that it was instituted to show the death of the Lord until His second coming. After the consecration, which the priest effects by saying over the bread and wine the same words which Jesus Christ said at the Last Supper, there is no longer bread and wine, but the true and living Jesus Christ, God and man, hidden under the appearances of bread and wine, just as in the manger He was hidden under the appearance of an infant. The priest offers Him up to His heavenly Father in the name of the Catholic Church, or rather He offers Himself up, and we can confidently hope that we will obtain more through prayers at the holy Mass than through our own unaided prayers. In order to have part in the holy sacrifice of the Mass a person should follow the actions and prayers of the priest, especially at the offertory, consecration, and communion; meditate on the passion of Christ; say the rosary or the prayers in the prayer-books, at the same time uniting his intention with the intention of the sacrificing priest.

The sacrifice of the Mass is a true sacrifice, because it is the oblation of a victim to God to represent by its destruction or change His supreme dominion over life and death. It is offered to satisfy our four great debts and wants in adoration to God on account of His omnipotence, in thanksgiving for His benefits, in atonement for our sins, and to obtain His assistance in difficulties and temptations. The holy Mass obtains for us all graces and blessings, temporal and spiritual.

Since the Mass is the highest act of public worship, it is proper that it should be celebrated with fitting sacred ceremonies. Every ceremony which the Church prescribes has its deep significance. All tend to bring before our minds the mystery of the passion.

The *altar*, which is reached by means of steps, represents Mount Calvary, upon which Christ died with His arms extended as if to enfold all men as brothers. The *crucifix* recalls Jesus dying on the cross. The *lighted candles* are symbols of the faith and devotion which ought to burn in the hearts of the faithful when present at Mass. The *sacred vestments*, embroidered with the sign of the cross, indicate that the priest is the minister and visible representative of Jesus Christ, the invisible priest. The sign of the cross made many times by the priest over the host and chalice reminds us that we offer to God the divine Victim of the cross, and that we ought to unite ourselves to Him by loving the cross, by patience and Christian penance. We genuflect because Our Lord is really present. If we know He is not present on the altar we bow in honor of the place where He sometimes reposes. *Holy water* is used to signify that our souls must be pure if we wish God to answer our prayers. *Incense* is used at solemn High Mass and at Vespers. It is symbolic of prayer, agreeably to the words of the 140th psalm: "Let my prayer, O Lord, be directed as incense in Thy sight." And St. John, describing the heavenly Jerusalem in the 8th chapter of the Apocalypse, says: "Another angel came, and stood before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which is before the throne of God."

The sacrifice of the Mass, then, is the sacrifice of Calvary, since the same Victim is offered up and by the same High Priest, Jesus Christ. The Emanuel, the God with us, the thought of whom made the prophets tremble centuries before He came, that divine Teacher who loves to dwell with the children of men, the Catholic Church beholds dwelling in the midst of us on our altars. If you have visited some of our ancient cathedrals, or any of our magnificent modern churches, and admired the varied ornaments or artistic wonders therein; if you have ever been present at our religious solemnities and witnessed the gravity of our ceremonies, the beauty of the chants, the piety of the adorers; if you have reflected upon the spirit of sacrifice and self-forgetfulness so common to Catholicism and so unknown elsewhere – that spirit which moves thousands of the young of both sexes to forsake the world and devote themselves to the care of the sick, the education of the young, and to other works of charity – if you have witnessed these things and reflected upon them, you can not but have asked yourself why are such gorgeous temples built; why such magnificent works of art as displayed on the altar, the sacred vessels, paintings, and other things in the church? What prompts such sacrifices? And the answer will be, because the church is the edifice where God in the holy Mass daily renews the prodigies of His mercy, and it can never be worthy of His love; because God, who sacrificed Himself for us, is ever with us in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, to soothe our cares and answer our prayers. Yes, the grand feature of the Catholic Church is the holy altar. On the altar is the tabernacle for the residence of the Lord of Hosts.

There our "hidden God," Jesus in the Eucharist, dwells night and day in the midst of His people, saying to them with words of love, "Come to me all you that are burdened and heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

The Mass, independent of its sacrificial aspect, consists of the best prayers ever uttered. The priest begins by making the sign of the cross, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." This sign is an epitome of the Christian's belief in the unity and trinity of God and in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. After making the sign of the cross he repeats the 42d psalm, "Judge me, O God," and then makes an humble confession of his sins to God. He ascends the altar and nine times asks God to have mercy on him, *Kyrie Eleison*; then follows the beautiful hymn the shepherds heard the angels singing at the birth of the Saviour, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

The prayer of the feast, the epistle and gospel follow, and then the sermon in the vernacular is usually preached. After the Nicene Creed, *Credo in Unum Deum*, the priest makes the offering of bread and wine. He then washes the tips of his fingers, saying: "I will wash my hands among the innocent," by which he is reminded to be free from stain to offer worthily the Holy Sacrifice.

The preface, canon, and solemn words of consecration follow, during which the bread and wine are changed by the power of Jesus Christ into His body and blood. In a short time he comes to the best

of all prayers, the prayer taught us by Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Our Father, *Pater Noster*. The *Agnus Dei* follows, then the communion, when he partakes of the consecrated bread and wine, and afterward gives holy communion to the faithful. He then continues the Mass, gives his blessing, and finishes the Mass with the beginning of the Gospel of St. John. Hence you see that, besides the great sacrifice which makes it an act worthy of God, the Mass consists of the best of all prayers.

From what has been said it is evident that ceremonies in the worship of God are reasonable, being sanctioned by God in the Old and New Testaments; that the holy sacrifice of the Mass is the greatest of all acts of worship; and that the Catholic Church in using ceremonies is but following the example of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and His apostles. St. John in the Book of Revelations tells us that before the throne of God angels stand with golden censers, multitudes from all nations follow and adore the Lamb, while virgins sing the new song which they alone can utter. So, too, before the throne of God on earth we swing our censers, multitudes from all nations prostrate themselves in adoration, the sweet incense of their praise and prayer ascends to the throne of grace, their minds are enlightened by God's word, while their hearts are raised to God by the grandeur of our ceremonies.

The Son of God, after having taught us by His word, shown us by His example, and merited for us by His grace the virtues necessary for salvation, wished to institute the holy sacrifice of the Mass, that He might come Himself in the Holy Sacrament and imprint them upon us. Of these virtues, the most important are *humility, purity, obedience, patience, and charity*.

Let us always ask God when present at the holy Mass for a lively faith in His *Real Presence*, an ardent love for Him in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, and the grace to imitate His humility, His purity, His meekness, obedience, patience, and charity *here*, and enjoy His presence forever *hereafter*.

The following beautiful words of Cardinal Newman show that the Mass is something more than a mere form of words, and that ceremonies are reasonable as well as necessary in its celebration:

"To me nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overcoming, as the Mass said as it is among us. I could attend Masses forever and not be tired. It is not a mere form of words – it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth. It is not the invocation merely, but, if I dare use the word, the evocation of the Eternal. He becomes present on the altar in flesh and blood, before Whom angels bow and devils tremble. This is that awful event which is the scope and the interpretation of every part of the solemnity. Words are necessary, but as means, not as ends; they are not mere addresses to the throne of grace, they are instruments of what is far higher, of consecration, of sacrifice.

"They hurry on as if impatient to fulfil their mission. Quickly they go, for they are awful words of sacrifice; they are a work too great to delay upon, as when it was said in the beginning, 'What thou doest, do quickly.' Quickly they pass, for the Lord Jesus goes with them, as He passed along the lake in the days of His flesh, quickly calling first one and then another; quickly they pass, because as the lightning which shineth from one part of the heaven unto the other, so is the coming of the Son of Man.

"Quickly they pass, for they are as the words of Moses, when the Lord came down in the cloud, calling on the name of the Lord as He passed by, 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and generous, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.' And as Moses on the mountain, so we, too, make haste and bow our heads to the earth and adore.

"So we, all around, each in his place, look for the great Advent 'waiting for the moving of the water,' each in his place, with his own heart, with his own wants, with his own prayers, separate but concordant, watching what is going on, watching its progress, uniting in its consummation; not painfully, and hopelessly following a hard form of prayer from beginning to end, but like a concert of musical instruments each different, but concurring in sweet harmony, we take our post with God's priest, supporting him, yet guided by him. There are little children there, and old men, and simple laborers, and students in seminaries, priests preparing for Mass, priests making their thanksgiving,

there are innocent maidens, and there are penitent sinners; but out of these many minds rises one Eucharistic hymn, and the great action is the measure and the scope of it."

The Practices of the Catholic Church

I. Vespers and Benediction

"Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day" (Ex. xx. 8).

THIS commandment teaches us that God wills the whole Sunday to be spent in His honor. We should sanctify it by good works, and by assisting at divine service. On that day servile works and improper amusements are forbidden. A salutary rest and moderate recreation are allowed, but never at the expense of duties of obligation. After hearing Mass on Sunday morning, which is obligatory on all Catholics, there is no better way of sanctifying the remainder of the day than by attending Vespers and Benediction.

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