

POLITENESS IN THE PEWS

By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

Whenever a “Short Subject” by Pete Smith flashes on the screen, I sit back and prepare to chuckle.

(One hesitates to praise unrestrictedly anything that comes from Hollywood. Hollywood has a way of making you regretfully revoke your praise. But that is not the point at issue here.)

Pete Smith has remained thus far one my favourites. And nothing else that he has yet produced tickled me more than the film titled—as far as I can recall “Manners at the Movies.” In the Hollywoodland inclusiveness of the word, it was TERRIFIC. He managed to photograph all the movie pests who make attendance at the motion pictures a hazard and a nuisance. There were the couple who go up and down the aisles, now and then standing still and blocking off the picture from the view of those who are seated, while they loudly discuss the pros and cons of seats. He enters a row, and she is not satisfied; so he comes out again. She spots a place, climbs over half a dozen people to get to it, sits down, decides that she doesn’t like it, and climbs out again. And on and on ad infinitum.

In that film there was the young man who rams his knees into the back of your seat: how does it happen that you and I are always the ones who sit right in front of him?) and then pushes with all his young strength as he sinks further and further into his seat—and your back. There was the popcorn eater, who sounds like a rock crusher . . . and the girl who all through the quiet scenes loudly removes cellophane wrappings from individual caramels . . . and the woman who hums along with the leading lady’s rendering of some beautiful classic . . . and the girl who removes her enormous hat—under protest—only to be revealed to have a head of hair that spreads like a box hedge, thick, impenetrable, and completely concealing the picture from your view...and the man with the trained-seal cough . . . and the child who at short intervals crawls over the people in the row to get out for a drink, for gum, to see a friend, to—oh, to do anything that interrupts the progress of the film.

PESTS

And there is the man who is seeing the film for at least the second time and tells his companion what is coming next. After all, the girl with him is probably a moron ... or blind . . . or deaf to all but his loud whispers

And there is the shifter who moves his head back and forth, always blocking your view, no matter how you sit or shift your position . . . and the two who put their heads together in sentimental intimacy, cutting off the screen completely from your view . . . and the critic who enthusiastically likes or loudly dislikes the picture at the top of his whisper.

Maybe Pete Smith’s film didn’t characterize all these pests; maybe he included some others that I have here omitted. I do know, however, that as I watched the film I wanted to burst into loud and prolonged applause. In fact, I hoped that all the theatre owners throughout the country would for years and years and years to come show that film every afternoon and evening as a prelude to the main features, until such time as manners came back to the movies . . . and with them a little peace for the polite members of the audience who suffer from boors, bores, and ignoramuses.

As you can see, I think and feel warmly on the subject.

PESTS IN CHURCH

It is unlikely that Pete Smith will ever do a short-subject film called “Politeness in the Pews.” Probably he wouldn’t dare. But should he be considering it, I herewith offer him material for his scenario. For that matter the material is not mine alone. As a priest I mount the pulpit; I do not enter the pews. I use the sanctuary, not the nave. I am a denizen of the sacristy, not of the transepts. But well do I remember the days when I sat in the pews. As a priest I have watched those who sit in the pews.

When I happened to mention to some friends that I thought a discussion of politeness in the pews might be in place, their enthusiastic suggestions sent my pencil racing over my note pad until I had filled pages with protests and recommendations that they transmitted to me.

Maybe after you’ve read this, you’ll insist on my immediately doing a complete revision in order to embody your experiences. Maybe (because you are of course the soul of courtesy in church and the model of manners at Mass) you

will send copies of this little discussion (in plain envelopes that will of course give no indication of the identity of the sender) to some people who have long made it unnecessary for You to wear a hair shirt. Going to church could be a pleasant duty. There are those of your acquaintance who cut, that pleasure, imperil the peace, and dim the joy.

SET FOR GOOD MANNERS

The Catholic should be all set for good manners when he walks into his church.

The churches are in the main beautiful, or they are aspiring to be beautiful.

The atmosphere is reverent and hushed; God's house is filled with God's presence, alive with the unheard rustling of angels' wings.

The priest who comes out to say Mass has had long training in correct conduct, manners that have developed through centuries of experience, conduct designed to indicate by every word and movement the solemnity of what the priest does.

The spirit of the churches is restful. Even the light that comes through the windows strokes the soul gently and soothingly.

Only the triumph of original sin makes possible bad manners in a Catholic church. But original sin is there, and for that a sad heigh-ho! and alas!

COURTESY OF SILENCE

When a Catholic enters his church, he knows that the Saviour of the world is present in the tabernacle. He knows that the great God of heaven and earth, who chose the temple of Jerusalem to fill it with His bright, shining presence, is in this church. So an intelligent Catholic talks to God, to the Eucharistic Christ, and to the saints and angels, who are the court attendants in this scene of divine royalty—and talks to no one else.

Fortunately and happily there is little need for more than the indication of this happy fact: Catholics do not come to church in order to catch up on the village gossip. They do not meet in the back pews to exchange the news. They do not signal friends (much less call to them) across the sweep of the transepts. They do not foregather in the shadow of Saint Anthony's altar-shrine to pass along the latest news about births, deaths, scandals, and successes.

The great courtesy of silence in the presence of God—or at least a physical attention to His silent voice, which fills the church—is the custom and rule among us.

ENTRANCE

A Catholic entering a church instinctively looks around for the holy-water font. He dips his fingers into the water gently; he does not dive into it. There is something a little queer about the person who plunges his fingers deeply into the water and then with a large gesture scatters on the floor the surplus water (a little like a shaggy dog emerging from a pool).

The Catholic then makes a sign of the cross that can set a sort of pattern for all signs of the cross.

I pause on the sign of the cross.

Here is our royal salute. Here is our gesture of faith; hope, and love. Here is the mighty sign that terrifies the devils and delights the angels. A sign of the cross is a poetical wedding of gesture and words. The lips say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." The hand completes the illustrative act. It is beautiful to see the sign of the cross made well! the left hand resting lightly on the breast; the right hand touching the forehead, the breast below the left hand, the left shoulder, the right shoulder. It is something to make one wince when the sign of the cross turns out to be a little circle spun by a rapid hand someplace between the chin and the top button on the waistcoat . . . or when it is the swift spinning of the hand in a sort of repeating pin wheel . . . or when the holy water fails to touch the forehead and is tossed into the air.

The salute we give to God is not the complete proof of our Catholicity; it may be however a gracious sign of the faith and reverence to bear toward God.

PEWS FRONT AND BACK

Inside the church the vast expanse of the pews stretches before us. As in Milton's description of Adam and Eve leaving Paradise, the world is all before us there to choose.

Certainly the dear Lord was not thinking of His future churches when He talked of the guests who brashly rush up to the front seats. Not in any church that I've ever attended have I seen such brashness. What that dread of front pews is, I leave to the research of psychologists; thus far they have not classified it along with fear of heights, of enclosed places, of wide spaces, of crowds, or of dark rooms. But it's a fear. A priest mounts the pulpit and sees a vast moat of emptiness stretching between him and the congregation. Like the straggling hairs on the head of a very bald man his parishioners form a fringe around the emptiness and vacuity.

Oh for a few more people brave enough to venture the apparently perilous pew way up front.

As it is, the pews that are filled first are always the back ones . . . with the result that the latecomers cluster in frightened fashion about the holy-water fonts in the very rear, or wander up the aisle in search for a seat—to the distraction of those already seated.

IF YOU ARE RUSHED . . .

As a matter of reassurance to those worshippers who have to leave early in order to put out a fire, or who must rush home to a constantly imperilled baby, or who have slipped away from cruel mistresses who beat their help if breakfast is late, I can guarantee that it is as easy to get out of church rapidly from the front pews as it is from the back. Most churches today are arranged with side exits that are usually little congested. The main doors at the rear are often a milling interchange between those who are leaving and those who are coming in. The side doors are easy avenues of egress. You can put out the fire, save the baby, and get the breakfast just as quickly if you have occupied the pew third from the front as you would if you occupied the pew third from the back.

I can assure you too that if you are seated in the front the altar is much closer, the words of the priest are much clearer, and your sense of nearness to God is much more vivid.

ON BENDED KNEE

It may well be that sometime in the remote future a diocesan official will be designated to be Director of Graceful Genuflection.

He will have quite a job.

I doubt that he will ever prevail, with the old gentleman who does the "rheumatic bob." Of course he is not really rheumatic. Indeed he claims to be very spry. But he is a bobber, no mistake; and he has been a bobber since his youth. God sees everything in the twinkling of an eye, so God knows that the bobber genuflected; but to the human eye it looks like slight twitch of the right knee, a twitch accomplished with a speed that would defy capture on an action camera.

At the opposite genuflection pole is the "deep dipper." She goes way, way down and stays there, until you wonder if perhaps you ought to put your gentle hand under her arm and raise her to vertical position. Usually she has put her left foot far forward and has dropped her right knee to the floor of the church a foot or a yard behind that left knee. The result is a bent back all ready to accept its burden.

A genuflection, a bending of the knee (as the Latin word puts it), is really a very graceful step in the liturgical dance. The left foot rests firmly on the floor. The right knee is bent until it almost touches the heel of the left foot. The body is upright. The eyes are fixed on the tabernacle. One hand may rest lightly on the pew that one intends to enter. But the movement is swift and uninterrupted. The right knee is bent, touches the ground lightly (and with no thumping peril to the new mosaic floor, of which the pastor is justly proud), and at once is returned to normal position. The whole procedure is a flowing movement that is beautiful to behold.

Indeed it might be profitable some evening to teach the children of the family how to genuflect. They might as well learn early to do well something that they will do often in their lives.

EXEUNT USHERS, NOT SMILING

Very few churches today use ushers.

Probably the ushers found their work too, too lonesome. They are disappearing from most motion-pictures houses, too.

One of the things that have always caused me amusement is the sight of an ambitious young movie usher trustfully attempting to lead a group up the dark aisle of a movie theatre. You hear him whisper, "How far up, please?" To which the leader replies, in a much more sibilant whisper, "Just about centre, please."

The novice usher, flashlight in hand, moves forward, followed, he fondly flatters himself, by the group. But when he turns at the seats that he has found for them, he realizes that somewhere along the aisle he has lost the patrons. They thought they spotted a row they liked—only to find it filled. They paused to speculate whether that dark blob yonder is seats or two midgets crouched in mid-row. Whatever the explanation, they are on their own. So the usher disconsolately snaps off his flashlight and yields his position to the deep human urge for self-exploration.

Ushers in churches (except at fashionable weddings where they are severe drill sergeants) have with the years grown as discouraged as have those in movie theatres.

So now it is pretty much up to the individual to locate himself in the movie theatre or in the parish church.

At the risk of repetition but in the voice of a preacher who has so often felt dreadfully isolated in the pulpit, surrounded by empty pews, may I suggest the good manners of finding a seat well up front in church?

AN ANIMAL NOT IN THE ZOO

One would think that by this time the "end-seat hog" would have been laughed and scorned and hooted and hated out of existence. Apparently he or she (the breed is of both sexes) has a hide so thick that the other members of the porcine family are almost tender-skinned by comparison.

Who among you hasn't suffered from the "end-seat hog"?

He or she sits plank down on the very end seat of the pew. Usually he or she loads his or her lap with an overcoat, an umbrella, a parcel or two, plus several prayer books and rosaries. The "E.S.H." exercises a kind of squatter sovereignty (a right long gone from American history but still prevalent in our churches) by which he acquires the right of eminent domain over the whole pew. He (we'll skip the she, though she considerably outnumbers the he) buries his face in a prayer-book, sitting or kneeling with a firm impregnability that seems little short of eternal. "Upon this rock" is his favourite Bible quotation.

The pews fill up. Then a first unfortunate arrival must find a seat in an end-occupied pew. She pauses, timid soul, beside the "E.S.H." How deep his devotion! How rapt his meditation! He doesn't see her standing near the pew. He pays no attention to her gentle cough. Finally she touches him delicately on the shoulder, and he arouses himself with a start. Horrible profanation! a rash intruder has pulled him back from his deep communing with his Maker. He regards the annoying interloper with keen distaste and some surprise. Can it be that she wants something from him? He deliberates. Does she actually want to invade his conquered territory? The nerve!

INTRUDER

Further deliberation . . . then . . . there is nothing for it but submission to the aggression of the rude woman. He sighs heavily. He shifts laboriously. One by one he gathers up his hat, his topcoat, his umbrella, three of his four packages (the fourth falls to the ground, and he does a contortionist's twist to retrieve it), his rosary, his prayer books. Finally he manages to stand up, back bent in a sort of human leaning tower of Pisa, to allow her to pass.

With the apologies due the suzerain of the realm, the poor woman pushes through the narrow defile between his stomach with its frontal expanse of packages and the back of the preceding pew, squirming to get over the kneeling bench and around the disturbed man, who all this time fixes her with a long stare that nicely blends indignation, patience, resentment, wonder at her temerity, and a disgust with the sheer selfishness of the human blood.

Of course she is going to receive Holy Communion, and he is not. So at the "domine, non sum dignus" she has to repeat the ordeal of struggling through that human mountain pass . . . and then again when she returns from Holy Communion. After Mass he is saying the "Thirty-Days' Prayer," and she cannot leave until she has once more risked his wrath, compressed his stomach, knocked his packages about, and made a fool and a nuisance of herself.

Wonderful animals, the "end-seat hogs." Nothing will ever dent their hold on their natural habitat, the very end of a

pew. They come early. They stay late. They are durable as a ten-ton granite boulder dropped from an overhanging cliff onto a highway. And what is more, they will read this little section in this little booklet, nod assent., and go right on holding their fortresses against the march of progress and the advance of manners.

From “end-seat hogs” and the other strange abnormalities of the human species, O Lord, deliver us.
But will He? Or are they left for us to correct, for us to set examples of what not to do?

WELL IN

On the other hand the well-mannered Catholic enters the pew, moves to the far side, and kneels, sits, stands, prays, meditates happily undisturbed and undisturbing as the Mass proceeds and the worshippers ebb and flow. He has found a harbour, not a bottleneck. He has located an oasis, not the “in” and “out” of a subway entrance. He has a gracious little hermitage, not the toll gate on a superhighway.

CLOTHES

Catholics do not go to church to show off their clothes.

Years and years ago I wrote a little sentence that went something like this: “flowers cannot withhold their blooms as women do their Easter bonnets to display on the exactly right day in exactly the right church.” A gracious lady told me off, politely but with conviction. Spring hats are not nowadays withheld until Easter Sunday, she informed me. And sensible women do not go to church to show off their hats. “Please don’t,” she said, “put yourself in that class of stupid males who think that women use the parish church as a sort of fashion salon.”

I observed the facts for a bit after that and found that she was right.

We can start with the truism that Catholics do not go to church to show off their good clothes. On the other hand, average Catholics are rather careful about what they wear to church. They know that God would prefer to see them there in rags than have them stay at home. If they are bound for the links and dressed for golf, they don’t hesitate on that account to go to Mass first. On their way to work, dressed in work clothes, they stop in at church. That is as it should be.

Right now, with the fashions dipping and rising in extremes, the question of clothes in church is one that touches both men and women. Men as well as women are bound by rules for modesty in dress. Fashions that are not too sound even on the beach certainly are completely unsound in church. Styles that make even the less conservative lift an eyebrow would rightly cause the eyebrow to rise several wrinkles higher if those styles were exhibited at Mass. That is just common sense.

Any young man or woman who goes into church clad in a fashion that is extreme even outside of church is just too thoughtless to be affected by a few printed paragraphs of advice. Use your head and your good taste, my fine young people. Don’t expect us to be able to supply a head or taste to someone who hasn’t either.

HATS

The question of women and hats is eternal. St. Paul certainly started something when he ordered women to wear hats in church out of respect for the angels, who are also present.

Apparently St. Paul’s general direction was an outgrowth of long-expected good manners. Women of dignity and position invariably covered their heads in public. They wore a graceful veil. They wound a fillet in their hair. They piled their hair in orderly fashion and crowned it with flowers or some other kind of head-dress. A woman’s beautifully adorned head was a sign of her rank and quality. Slaves and women of low character went with heads uncovered and hair unkempt.

So to St. Paul the respect shown by dignified matrons and maids in social gatherings was the kind of respect they should indicate by their manner of dressing for church. He asked only that women show as much respect for the angels who attended the altar of sacrifice as they did for the good society that was punctilious about the adornment of women’s heads.

The custom has continued—always a sign of Catholic women’s respect for themselves and for their host, Jesus Christ, and the company that attends Him.

So a veil, a hat, or some small covering for the head is a lovely manifestation of tribute to history and to a custom connected with the dignity of women.

LARGE AND FLOPPY

I should mildly suggest however that the hat be not a tremendous thing.

Males of whatever age love large hats. They think their women folk particularly charming (since so particularly feminine) when they wear vast, circular, floppy, rose-adorned, veil-draped hats. I suppose it is man's tribute to the superior skill of woman, who can in a windstorm manage to keep on her head a hat that would rise instantly from a man's head or carry him along with it into the upper spaces.

Indeed, men like women to wear large hats . . . but not when the women are sitting in front of them at the theatre or in church . . . not when these hats rise as impenetrable barriers obstructing the vision . . . not when the hats move like screens between the questing eyes and the things that are to be seen.

May I suggest that since hats cannot be removed in church—as surely they should be removed in the theatre—women be nice enough to wear to church hats that will not prove permanent impediments to others' seeing the altar? A simple request but important.

While we are on the subject of hats, may I as a priest voice a few suggestions about the sort of hat to be worn when one is going to receive Holy Communion.

Make it, please, a hat without a veil that hangs over the lips. If the hat demands a veil, please turn the veil back carefully. Else the poor priest will stand with the Host in his hands and wonder what to do: Ask the woman to lift her veil? Somehow lift the veil with his own totally inexperienced hands?

As one who has frequently officiated at Sodality receptions, I can say that hats are a major problem when a medal attached to a ribbon is to be slipped over the head. One great Archbishop has given the problem up as hopeless. The hats are too large, too wide, too high, too . . . well just too. So he lays the ribbons on the girls' shoulders and leaves the rest to their ingenuity.

PEWS AGAIN

Let's go back to those pews now.

I might note in passing that pews are a relatively late invention. The great churches of Europe still do not have pews. The earliest appearance of pews was apparently in Protestant churches where kneeling was reduced to a minimum. Pews were not designed primarily for Catholic devotions. When the person ahead of you is sitting down, it is very difficult for you to kneel without driving your folded hands into the back of his neck. If the person behind you is kneeling, you cannot suddenly sit down without throwing him off his balance and certainly putting him out of a spirit of rapt recollection.

So from the time that the Mass starts and people begin to sit and stand and kneel as a unit, one has to exercise care and courtesy and a degree of polite regard for the person in the pew in front and the one in the pew in back. If one must sit, it is not difficult to move slightly to the side of the person kneeling in back. If one wants to kneel, it is only fair to kneel where one will not breath heavily down the neck of the person who is sitting in the pew ahead.

In most churches the entire congregation does not receive Holy Communion. So when the tabernacle has been re-locked, there is usually a great stirring and confusion. Those who have not received Holy Communion now suddenly and emphatically sit back in the pews; those who have received Holy Communion continue to kneel. The consequent collisions and conflicts, squirmings and adjustings do little indeed to inspire peaceful thanksgiving to the Eucharistic Lord.

I can offer no solution for this problem beyond a plea for a general decency and courtesy like that which we display toward anyone who depends upon us for comfort and moderate peace of mind. Again, that is just a matter of simple thoughtfulness.

EQUIPMENT

The Catholic who knows his religion comes to Mass properly equipped. He is at least as well prepared as a

sportsman going to a game or an opera lover to the opera. He does not come empty-handed. He carries his missal as his guide to the Mass and his means of personal participation in the Mass. Or he brings a prayer book. If he prefers his rosary, he has his rosary ready for use.

No one else looks more ignorant or more discourteous than the man or the woman who is empty-handed during Mass or a church service, whose look grows vague and distracted, and whose eyes inevitably start to wander—sure sign that the mind is wandering too. It is tragic that, the physical presence being all that is required to avoid the mortal sin of missing Mass, so many Catholics during the infinitely precious moments of Mass do absolutely nothing.

Among the equipment not to bring to Mass are huge bags and a multiplicity of packages and canes (unless one is expert in the handling of them) and any article that cannot easily be disposed of. Some day improved Catholic church architecture may provide checkrooms. Some day the space under the seats may be built to hold the impedimenta of the worshipper. In the interval a churchgoer, like a modern plane traveller, is wise to travel light.

JUST NOTES

Akin to that old animal monstrosity the “end-seat hog” is the person who fills the empty seats beside him with coat, hat, baggage, umbrella, packages, and books. Invariably when others come to occupy the rest of the pew, he looks up indignantly (a trick he learned from the “E.S.H.”), sighs painfully, removes his property reluctantly, and makes the intruder feel like a heel who is causing a guiltless victim to be crushed under the weight of intolerable burdens.

May one remark by the way in swift transit that kneeling benches are exactly what the name implies? They are not footrests. They are not hassocks. You who rest your muddy feet thereon . next time you go to church in your best new spring outfit, may you be shown into a pew that has lately been occupied by someone who scraped his muddy feet on the kneeling bench . . . and may you rise from your knees with your light trousers or new dress permanently stained with mud—the same sort of mud that you left behind on other kneeling benches.

THE REAR GUARD

There is a special race of young men whose natural habitat is the space between the back wall and the last pew. Julius Caesar repeats a tall tale of some animals found in the German forests in his day that had no joints in their legs. They could rest only by leaning against the trees. So the hunters did not bother to shoot them with arrows; they merely cut down the trees against which the sleeping animals rested, and the animals toppled over, were unable to rise (no joints, you see), and were captured.

The only descendants of these mythical animals that I can think of are the young men who lean against the back walls of parish churches. They must have no joints in their knees. At least they find kneeling one of the most tortuous tasks of life. They cluster close to the centre exit. They come in when they are absolutely sure that the priest has reached the foot of the altar. They slip out for a smoke during the announcements and the sermon. And when the priest says, “Ite, Missa est,” “Go, Mass is finished,” they show the first sign of response. With a joyous “Thanks be to God!” they are out, hats on, cigarettes lighted, and conversation resumed—before the priest’s hand has finished the movements of the blessing.

If they make heaven, they will probably make a last-minute rush for it just as the gates are closing. Surely there will be a special place for them near the heavenly checkroom, where they can cluster together protectively, far, far from the great white throne, some place where the scent of fire and smoke comes reminiscently from outside.

Would it do any good to tell them that if, as some of the worst-mannered do, they deliberately skip the section of Mass prior to the Offertory and then leave right after the Communion, they have not heard a complete Mass or fulfilled the obligation that is binding under pain of serious sin?

ON TIME

While we are on that subject of time and the Mass, may I suggest that politeness requires that we arrive in time? By “in time” I think that any well-mannered person means sufficiently before the service to be in one’s place, with one’s mind disposed, and a calm expectancy of the great things to be done. Is five minutes before the beginning of Mass too much to ask?

In my particular line of priestly work it is not often my privilege to say Mass in parish churches. When I do say Mass in a parish church, I understand the irritation felt by priests (and its divine equivalent by God) when the second that the prayers at the foot of the altar are finished there is a mass rising and a violent rush as the great body of the faithful dash and scramble from the church.

The second the priest has finished the last “O Sacred Heart of Jesus” and has risen to get the chalice from the altar they bolt for the door. I have sometimes turned as I walked from the altar to the sacristy and seen my congregation presenting to me a solid bank of backs. I did for them the finest thing: I offered God the Sacrifice of the Mass and spoke to the best of my ability Christ’s truth. They dashed out before I left the sanctuary, jamming into the aisles and piling out as if someone had suddenly called out, “Air raid!”

I don’t like it. I doubt that God likes it.

QUIET AND NOISE

People who visit a Catholic Church for the first time are usually deeply impressed with the quiet that prevails. So many people gather together, and so much order and reverence! Though they be utterly ignorant of what is going on, the strangers find in the Catholic church a calm that is utterly restful, a peace that is all pervading.

Unless, alas! it happens that an epidemic of coughing has seized the community.

Some coughing is inevitable. Some coughing is painful aftermath of hard winters. Much of the coughing, however, is like most of the awful throat clearing, plainly nervous habit, easily controlled but luxurious to pamper and release.

THROUGH STATIC

Have you ever been in church when the priest in the pulpit was raising a somewhat thin voice against the barrage of coughers who were drowning him out almost completely? The sermon sounded more than a little like this:

“My dear Brethren: The Gospel this morning is concerned with that important lesson which Christ taught regarding . . . bark! bark! bark . . . Our Lord has just returned from . . . gr-rrr! . . . where He had worked that preliminary miracle of . . . rrrr! bark! brrrrr! bark! . . . And when the man said to Him . . . cough! cough! cough! sneeze! . . . Our Lord spoke words we shall never forget . . . grr! grrr! arrr! hakes! . . . From this we learn that all-important lesson that . . . bark! cough! sneeze! gr-rr! hawk! br-rr . . . a blessing I wish you all in the name of . . . bark! gr-rr! br-rrr! . . . Amen.”

It makes a lot of interesting sense, doesn’t it?

Great orchestra conductors will stop a symphony, turn, and stand in complete silence until some cougher in the audience gets it over with. Christ and His priests are much more tolerant.

DISTURBING PRAYER

Coughing can sometimes be as involuntary as any other reflex. No one, the old saying goes, can hide a love, a fire, or a cough. Granted. But one can control all three . . . and should.

What can be controlled however—and should particularly be controlled—is the maddening habit of praying aloud..

Have you ever at the evening parish service found yourself sitting just in front of one of those dear souls who say their rosary in something between a croon; a keen; and a stage whisper? She usually kneels, her head far-forward so that her mouth is almost at your ear. You follow her devotions, deep, passionately, devout, resonant, fervid, warm, highly articulate, through the mysteries of the rosary to the final crowning of Our Lady.

Secondhand prayers are certainly not the most inspiring, and they do not make for deep devotion on the part of enforced listeners.

SLOW AND FAST

In somewhat the same disturbing category is the person near you who is always prayerfully out of step when the rosary is led by the priest and answered by the congregation. She answers the “Hail, Mary” with a “Holy Mary” that comes in about the middle of everyone else’s response. “Hail, Mary . . .” says the priest, praying devoutly his part of the prayer. “Holy Mary . . .” answers the congregation. And just as they reach, “pray for us sinners.... our all-out-of-step-but-Jim lets forth a loud and long-drawn-out, “Ho-o-o-ly Ma-a-a-ry. . .” Her sole and solitary voice is

heard long after the response of all the others has been ended.

The antithesis of this type is the prayer who wants to give the responses like a creature on the alert to pounce. “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” says the priest, “the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou . . .” Before he gets any further, there is a spurt of speed, a dash of power, a gush of words—and the quick-starter leaps in with “Holy Mary, Mother of God. . .” The rest of the congregation is left far, far back in the pack. Frequently one of these prayerful swallows, darting and dashing about the ears of the congregation, will, when he is finished, look around at the others with a disgusted air of “What’s keeping you?” Only the faith and devotion of good Catholic people keep them from walking out and leaving the field to his complete conquest.

Community prayer is prayer by a community. It is not a solid harmony carried for the sake of a soloist’s performance of an obligato to which the rest are mere musical background. There is much politeness in keeping one’s private devotions strictly private and making one’s community prayers an integral part of the community .

. . . AND SONG

In my salad days there was a sister who walked up and down the aisle at the children’s Mass, listening for the boys who persisted in singing an octave below key. That sound of a voice not harmonising but simply singing a premature bass disturbed her as it has disturbed, I think, every music lover before or since.

Nowadays, thanks to the blues’ singers on the radio, it is more likely the young ladies who sing the octave below. On the radio the men sound like contraltos and the women sound like baritones, so naturally enough confusion of the sexes has passed over into our singing congregation.

Needless to say, this is not a discussion of church music. But musical politeness might be summarized in a few simple rules. If you are tone deaf, sing to God in your heart. He will love your music, toneless though it be, and He will not be thrown off the tune.

Sing on the pitch; don’t dive an octave below.

If the singing is in unison, sing in unison. Your harmonization may be excellent, but in this case it will be distracting.

In church music the important thing is the words. The music is a mere carrying medium for the great content of the words,

Learn the words, and sing them as a great prayer straight for your heart.

If you have a voice, sing out. Full, rich, enthusiastic congregational singing must give deep joy to God.

Don’t look around to see who is singing and give them the look that means, “So You think you have a good voice, do you? Well, poor dear, it’s too bad that you have to come to church to show it off.”

Sing to the Lord in gladness. If possible, sing to Him in tune and in key.

VIEWED FROM THE PULPIT

I find it a good thing every so often to take my place in the pews. It brings back to me a few of the problems of the people who kneel there. For one thing it has made me think feelingly about badly designed kneeling benches, the kind that are too close together and that make you kneel as straight as a ramrod.

On the same principle I think that it might be an excellent thing if occasionally the faithful could get a viewpoint from the pulpit. Perhaps the faces of the congregation are a reflex reaction to the sermon of the preacher. Perhaps a rather vacuous sermon arouses vacuity in the upturned faces, and a sermon apathetically prepared arouses a corresponding apathy in the people.

Yet there are times when the preacher has really tried to prepare well and then do his prayerful best. Yet he looks out over a congregation of glazed eyes, unsuppressed yawns, and fingers leafing through the parish bulletin. It is deflating. The reaction may be deserved, but it’s hard to take.

Perhaps the preacher is far from inspiring. But he might retort that the average congregation is no great thriller either. Maybe if the people sat up with an air of expectancy . . . maybe if the preacher saw response in their eyes . . . maybe if the devotee of St. Jude didn’t during the sermon hurry over to pray fervently at his shrine . . . maybe if the client of the Little Flower didn’t turn the pages of her life eagerly just as the sermon text was announced . . . the priest

would be aroused to greater oratorical flights and to a keener desire to inspire his congregation.

For great oratory the ancient textbooks placed three necessary things: a great subject, a great man, a great occasion.

The great subject we always have.

The priests would be slow ever to call himself a great man.

An alert, interested, vital, deeply concerned audience makes an occasion.

The poor priest is thrown off by the man who constantly consults his watch . . . and the girl who looks around to see whether her young man, left like an umbrella in the stand at the back of the church, has escaped her . . . and the dear old lady who for a time cups her ear and then, as if the whole thing wasn't worth the effort, drops her hands and lapses into what the preacher knows is the delicious solitude of her deafness.

COURTESY AT CONFESSION

Confession is an occasion when good manners should have an important place.

Most churches have the custom of penitents standing in queues before the confessionals. It is an expedient not too happy, but it is necessary.

As a child, how I hated older people, who, just because I was young and hence defenceless, cut in ahead of me and said, "You don't mind if I go first, do you?" I minded like the very mischief. But what was I against their age and the authority of their years?

Since then I have noticed human torpedoes who lurk in the pews and then, when someone at the head of the Nine hesitates, suddenly dash out and into the confessional before the waiting penitents can protest—or can trip the villains.

It doesn't make for a prayerful confession to have someone steal your place in line.

There are simple considerations that promote much goodwill around a confessional. I will of course gladly hear the confession of anyone at any time; but I offer it up as one of my major penances when the penitent breathes into my dark and not-too-well-ventilated compartment the emphasis of freshly gathered onions, the smell of not-too-good whisky, the reek of stale tobacco, or the enthusiastic rehearsal of recent garlic.

In the church of my childhood it was a matter of minor excommunication to send children to confession in the evening. The evening was reserved for adults; children went to confession in the morning or in the early afternoon.

Undoubtedly there are circumstances that make it necessary for a child to go to confession in the evening. But as a practice it is a lack of consideration for the adults who work and the women whose days are occupied with households.

How very annoying it is to priest and people when parents bring large broods of children to confession just before Trinity Sunday, on Christmas Eve, or on the afternoon of Holy Saturday.

There are possibly some excuses. Offhand I find such excuses hard to locate.

WHEN JAMMED

The priest is glad enough to hear at any time and in any place the confession that begins, "Father, it's thirty years since my last confession, and I've forgotten how to go about it." But it's fifty to one that that opening line will be delivered about ten o'clock on the night before Trinity Sunday, with a hundred people standing in two lines outside a confessional in which one priest has already been hearing confessions for the last twelve hours. People who have heavy problems to discuss or long periods of delinquencies to straighten out are welcome at any time. But how much courtesy and common sense they would show if they came when the priest was not besieged by phalanxes of waiting penitents or on a day when less than half the parish wanted to go to confession.

Come any time, you who want your sins absolved. Those waiting in line will however love you much better if you don't pick the really crowded seasons of the year to explain your troubles with your daughter-in-law, to find out about that property that you think you perhaps should return, or to square accounts for a half-century absence from church.

AT THE ALTAR RAIL

Holy Communion is by Christ's own design a feast of brotherly love. It is the endless repetition of the agape, the love feast of the early Christians, where men and women gathered happily around the table of the Lord to express their

love for Him, to feel His love for them, and to manifest in the breaking of bread at a communal table their love for one another.

The last thing in the world that Holy Communion should be is a dash, a crush, or a bargain-basement struggle.

Every Catholic should know exactly when to go to Holy Communion. Those who are up front would do well to advance to the communion rail just the minute that the triple ringing of the bell announces that the priest has said the “*Doming, non sum dignus.*” When he turns for the absolution, the priest is pleased to see people reverently kneeling at the communion rail, the altar cloth under their chins, their eyes raised in welcome to the coming of their Lord.

From that moment on the approach of the rest of the congregation should be orderly and reverent. Dashing up the aisles, arms swinging . . . the sudden leap by which one thrusts oneself into a small space between two people already at the altar rail . . . the person going toward the altar rail bumping against the one coming back—all this is bad taste, bad manners, and totally unnecessary.

Confusion and collision, even harsh looks and the stealing of places at the love feast are utterly incongruous.

MOUTHS AND TONGUES

Every priest who has for a brief time been distributing Holy Communion could qualify as a specialist on mouths and tongues. And how he comes to appreciate the people who receive Holy Communion correctly!

The well-instructed person closes his eyes when the priest comes to him. He has kept his eyes open to be sure of the moment that the priest will stand before him. Now he lifts his head and shuts his eyes, not tightly, but enough so that he will not be staring at the priest. It is amazing how many people look up, embarrassed, with eyes glazed and fixed, not knowing where to look, not wanting to outstare the priest, not wishing to look at the Host, and yet never thinking simply to close their eyes—as they should.

That well-instructed person opens his mouth quietly and holds his head firmly and without motion. Some people pull back just as the priest approaches with the Host. Time and again in cases of this kind the priest drops the Host, and the communicant wonders why.

The correct communicant does not snap at the Host. In this case too the priest is likely to drop the Host. He is advancing the Host toward the open mouth, when all of a sudden and without warning the communicant thrusts his mouth forward and snaps; and with that quick protective instinct that is a reflex, the priest pulls back.

The mouth should be well open.

It is maddening to try to locate a mouth hidden by a lowered head . . . or a mouth that bares teeth that are almost closed . . . or a mouth open in a sort of affected cupid’s bow.

Each Catholic might well study before a mirror the position in which his tongue should be to receive Holy Communion. Some people put forward the daintiest little peninsula of a tongue, utterly inadequate to offer a solid resting place for the Host. Others manage somehow to lift their tongue into a round hump: a position that imperils the Host. Still others thrust their tongue so far forward that the priest is confronted with an unnecessary and unexpected view of palate and tonsils.

It is no difficult trick to offer the tongue for the reception of Holy Communion. The tongue should be presented wide, flat, resting easily on the teeth, a firm, solid surface to welcome and hold the Host, the Eucharistic Lord.

AFTERWARD

After he has received Holy Communion, the instructed Catholic goes back to his place with reverently folded hands, eyes cast down, and a gait suggesting the living tabernacle that he surely is. However hard it may be to control the meandering of one’s thought, it is not difficult to assume a reverent physical attitude, which at least indicates to the Saviour that we should like to be prayerful and thoughtful if our minds were not so flea-like and so much the will of the wisp.

Need we even pause to mention the obvious good manners that should mark a devout thanksgiving after Holy Communion and the careful use of those precious moments when Christ is our beloved guest and we are host to the Host?

AND SO . . .

There is another long section to be written about the good manners of paying for booklets taken from the bookrack . . of writing one's name on the envelope that contains one's contribution to the church funds . . of the care of children during Mass and church services

This is, however, enough for now.

I shall try as a priest to exercise near the altar those lovely manners that are the ritual and rubrics of the Church. I shall be happy if these little suggestions help the laity to better manners in that great body of the church where the royal priesthood of the faithful helps me to do the work of God and to offer up the sacrifice of the Lord.

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