

Are processions really necessary during Mass?

One biblical image, common in scripture but often overlooked in our contemporary consciousness, is that of God's people on a journey, moving together in an orderly fashion toward a longed-for destination. One particularly important journey in our religious history is the Exodus "procession" of God's chosen people through the Red Sea, from slavery in Egypt to freedom.

After the Israelites settled in the promised land, the pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem could be seen as a form of procession to the place where the paschal lambs were sacrificed. In fact, Psalms 120—134 all have the title of "a song of ascents" and were probably used during the processions of pilgrims moving up the hillside toward Jerusalem for major religious feasts.

In our personal history, our life can be seen as a journey, a "procession," from birth to death, from womb to tomb. This journey in life is liturgically celebrated, ideally, with the processions from the door of a church to the nave and then to the font during the rites of baptism, and then the journey to the church and to the cemetery as part of the funeral rites. These formal, stylized journeys are not merely practical ways for a group of people to change location. They are symbolic of our journey toward our eternal home with God.

One procession that still can affect people more widely in contemporary society is the final procession taken by family and friends with the body of a deceased relative from the church to a cemetery. Even with the numerous disruptive traffic jams associated with our modern life, in many places the funeral procession still is given the final courtesy of precedence, a stark, public reminder that we ourselves must all one day participate in that ultimate procession to our final resting place.

During Eucharistic Prayer III, the priest prays that God may "strengthen in faith and love" his "pilgrim Church on earth." Envisioning the Church as a people on pilgrimage, a people journeying in procession toward the "new Jerusalem" (Rev 21:2), namely heaven, has been an honored image throughout our religious history (see GIRM

318). Hence, any procession that is part of the liturgy is never merely a practical means to move certain people from one place to another, but always a symbol of our on-going journey toward God and toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

During Mass, there are several processions, each of which has a practical purpose, but each also reminding us that the Church is always on a journey. At the beginning of Mass there is usually a formal procession of the ministers toward the sanctuary and, on certain days such as on Palm Sunday or at the Easter Vigil, this initial procession ideally includes the entire assembly. Before the proclamation of the Gospel, there is the formal procession by the deacon with the Book of the Gospels (sometimes accompanied by incense and candles) from the altar to the ambo while the assembly joyfully sings the Alleluia.

At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, representatives of the assembly bring forward the gifts of bread and wine, and often the monetary offerings, from the midst of the church to the altar. At Communion, the assembly comes forward in procession to the table of the Lord to be nourished by Christ's body and blood.

These four processions all have significant meaning and should be done with a reverence and formality appropriate to their location and purpose in the liturgy. It is for this reason that the Missal prescribes hymns to be sung by all while these processions take place (GIRM 47, 175, 74, 86), songs intended to unite the assembly in voice and spirit.

There is one other procession of lesser importance that most often is purely pragmatic, the concluding procession of the ministers from the sanctuary to the sacristy (and of the assembly from the church into the world).

Typically, there is little reference to this action since it is, in a real sense, anti-climactic and primarily functional, and this is one reason why the Roman Missal never mentions any sort of hymn associated with this final procession (e.g., GIRM 169, 186, 193).

In two cases, however, this final procession



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does have a special significance and hymns are prescribed: at the end of a funeral Mass when the remains of the deceased are taken from the church to the cemetery for burial, and at the end of the Mass of the Lord's Supper when the Blessed Sacrament is carried from the altar to its place of reservation.

Our liturgical rites are symbol-filled, but, accustomed as we are in our pragmatic culture to focus on words, we tend to overlook the meaning that symbols speak forth, usually non-verbally. Jesus reminded us that he is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). The processions in our liturgies are a continual reminder of the invitation given us to unite together in following Jesus, our way to the Father, along the pathways of life.

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ORDER OF PROCESSION

Once the people have gathered, the priest and ministers, clad in the sacred vestments, go in procession to the altar in this order:

- (a) the thurifer carrying a thurible with burning incense, if incense is used*
- (b) the ministers who carry lighted candles, and between them an acolyte or other minister with the cross*
- (c) the acolytes and other ministers*
- (d) a [deacon or] lector, who may carry the Book of the Gospels (though not the Lectionary) which should be slightly elevated*
- (e) the priest who is to celebrate the Mass*

If incense is used, before the procession begins, the priest puts some in the censer (thurible) and blesses it with the Sign of the Cross without saying anything.

Processions in Holy Week

YOU MAY feel you deserve applause when you get out of bed or off the couch and go to church. After all, many Catholics don't even do that much. You do. During Holy Week, however, going to church is not enough. Just when you think you can settle into your favorite pew, you will be asked to stand up, leave your place, and walk. Many Catholics resist. They become pew potatoes. But those who join the processions of Holy Week will find their faith and charity rewarded.

On Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, for example, the Mass may begin outdoors. Instead of going directly into the church as usual, you may gather in another area—indoors or out. The priest will bless the palm branches; he or the deacon will proclaim the Gospel, and then all process into the church acclaiming Christ.

On Thursday of the Lord's Supper, the evening Mass does not conclude in the usual way. Instead, a procession forms right after Communion. The Blessed Sacrament is brought to a special chapel or tabernacle. You may be invited to join this procession, singing hymns of praise and moving to a place where you may pray privately in the course of the night.

During the Good Friday liturgy, you will be invited forward to adore the Cross.

At the Easter Vigil, as on Palm Sunday, you may be invited to start Mass outside the church. There a fire may be burning, signifying the Resurrection of Christ, the light that shatters darkness. Carrying candles, you enter the church following a pillar of fire, as our ancestors marched from slavery to freedom.

The processions of Holy Week draw us into the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. It is worthwhile to get up out of the pew.

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