

Third Sunday of Advent, B – December 17, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 975 words

In the gospel for this Third Sunday of Advent, St. John the Baptist protests that he is not the Christ. More than that, he is not worthy to untie the straps of Christ’s sandals. John, of all people, could have made a claim on a certain casual familiarity with Jesus. For one, they were kin; two, they were close in age; and three, John’s vocation was to prepare his way – surely the opening act also gets a backstage pass. But the Baptist instead models for us a formality and a reverence with respect to the Lord: he does not cash in on any legitimate claims of familiarity, but even emphasizes the opposite. As John will later say in the same gospel, “He” – Christ – “must increase; I must decrease”.¹

Our preparation for Christmas therefore must include this consideration: how is our reverence toward God and the things of God? The scriptures often speak of God simply as “the Holy One”² – for all other holiness falls short and is only analogous. We acclaim God as thrice-holy in each and every Mass as we chant the Sanctus, three being the number of perfection. In the book of Job we read that “even the heavens are impure in his sight”.³ He is the Creator, we are his lowly creatures.⁴ And even after God became one of us in Christ, yet we still see the reverence and respect due to God being accorded to Jesus throughout the gospels: from those who kneel before him to ask what they desire,⁵ to the centurion who confesses beneath the Cross, “This was truly the Son of God”,⁶ while the people returned home striking their breasts.⁷

The Bible is a teacher, and we may rightly conclude from the large amount of evidence found therein that God expects a high level of reverence from his creatures. Questions of justice – what is due him – aside, it is how he has instructed us to act. Think about the scene of the burning bush.⁸ Think about the minute instructions he gave concerning the Temple and how the priests were to offer sacrifice.⁹ So often we have had a tendency to decide how it is that we will worship God – on our own terms.¹⁰ This was especially the case after our worship was drastically changed in the 1960s and 70s. In many parishes and even on the diocesan level, liturgy committees formed and all manner of novelty came from them, as the sacred liturgy – divine worship – was treated as something that could be shaped to reflect the local community, instead of the One who was being worshiped. In many ways it became “all about us”. This was exactly the backwards approach: for it is God who decides how we are to approach him.

The great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand once wrote that “reverence permits us to experience the sacred, to rise above the profane”; it is an attitude of openness before a greater being.¹¹ This openness is facilitated by the physical acts handed down by our tradition. When we kneel, we physically humble ourselves before the sacred and acknowledge that we are in its presence. When we genuflect, that pause and physical gesture helps us to focus on the Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist – a Presence we could so easily ignore or forget if we did not have these actions to make us stop and think. When we bow profoundly during the

¹ John 3:30.

² All throughout the book of Isaiah, for example. See also gospel passages such as John 6:69. Finally, even the demons confess this truth – see, for example, Luke 4:34.

³ Job 15:15.

⁴ See Mary’s *Magnificat*, Luke 1:48.

⁵ See, for example, Matthew 9:18, Mark 10:17, and Luke 5:8.

⁶ Matthew 27:54.

⁷ Luke 23:48.

⁸ Exodus 3:1-17; Moses must remove his shoes before approaching God.

⁹ The citations are too numerous to be included here.

¹⁰ Nadab and Abihu were slain by God for worshipping him in their own way instead of his. See Leviticus 10:1-2.

¹¹ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Case for the Latin Mass*, printed in the October 1966 issue of *Triumph*.

Creed at the mention of the Incarnation, and genuflect on Christmas and the Annunciation at those words, it reminds us of how God humbled himself in becoming man. And when we follow the rubrics of Mass¹² and bow our heads at the names of Jesus, Mary, and the saint of the day whenever they are mentioned, it helps us to hold those names in esteem and avoid any temptation ever to misuse or dishonor them.¹³

More than physical acts, however, there are two other requirements for proper reverence: recollection of soul and sacred silence. The two often go together. If we are rushing into Mass, or even arriving early but then talking or checking our phones until it begins, achieving a state of recollection is very unlikely. If we start talking immediately after Mass, even while we are still in church, it is not as likely that we will maintain a sense of the presence of God long after we leave. The house of God should be a place of holy silence. Scripture speaks to us about this also: the prophet Habakkuk proclaims, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him”.¹⁴ And God himself says in the book of Leviticus, “Observe my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary”.¹⁵ God is really and truly present here in that beautiful tabernacle. Do we bend the knee, do we quiet ourselves, do we adore? And not just for a brief moment at the beginning, but for the entire time that we are in his presence?

On this Gaudete Sunday, this Sunday of rejoicing, we look forward to the great feast of Christmas. As we heed St. John the Baptist’s example and reflect on what he teaches us about reverence, let us therefore also think about the sacred silence of Bethlehem, pierced only by the singing of angels. Let us find the time and space needed to recollect ourselves for Christmas, and to make a better habit of doing so each time we come to the Lord’s temple, his abode, his house, the church. Let us reflect more on the gestures that our tradition has given us as means of being reverent and perform them with greater devotion. Let us indeed follow John in avoiding all casualness and over-familiarity with the Lord. If John did not consider himself worthy, then how humble should we be? Christ truly must increase; we must decrease!

¹² See *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 275. Many older Catholics learned to do this; in more recent times the tradition has largely been lost, although the rule is still there. In fact, priests used to be careful how they spoke of Christ in their homilies, avoiding saying “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” more than just a couple of times, so that people were not having to continually bow their heads. Thus they would say instead, “Christ”, “our Blessed Lord”, “our Lord”, “the Master”, etc. in order to refer to Jesus. It would be good to recover this awareness and tradition.

¹³ Father Alex Schrenk, a priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, recently posted on his Twitter account (@schrenk) on December 7, 2017: “Rubrics direct the priest to bow his head when speaking or hearing the Holy Name during the liturgy (GIRM 275). I’ve been doing this since starting seminary, and after a few years, the idea of using the name of Jesus irreverently becomes almost physically unthinkable.”

¹⁴ Habakkuk 2:20.

¹⁵ Leviticus 19:30.