

AFTERWORD

Liturgy, as a human institution, is dynamic. While it celebrates the unchanging Eternity of God, liturgy itself is constantly evolving. The ceremonial set forth in this volume is not meant to be construed as having been dictated on stone tablets by a mighty voice, or, for that matter, a still small one. Nor is it presented as the one and only correct way of doing things. Practical necessity, such as architectural restrictions or unexpected contingencies, may prescribe variations in other times and places. There is the famous story of a Christmas Eve Midnight Mass during which a tree placed in the sanctuary caught fire. A commendably calm acolyte fetched the fire extinguisher, doused the flame, and went back to his place in the liturgy; all with the proper reverence and so smoothly that a visitor afterwards commented to the Rector that she loved “the ceremony of the burning bush”!

Other accidents of nature may from time to time intrude upon ceremonial. The potent symbolism of taking the Rogation Procession outdoors must revert to more subtle imagery when a spring downpour forces the procession to remain inside. Perhaps this is God’s own sense of humor at work. That He has a sense of humor is evident from the fact that He created the cats who have from time to time visited the Advent during Divine Worship, leading to the solemn rite (not included in this volume) of the Removal of the Cat, wherein the Acolyte shall reverently transfer the animal to the possession of an usher, who shall gently deposit the cat in the garden; this ritual to be repeated five minutes later when the cat inevitably comes back in.

One thing liturgy is *not* a stage for individual performance. The purpose of undifferentiated vestments is to impose anonymity; each server’s personality, with all its quirks and qualities good and bad, must give way to the corporate standard and practice. Despite the temptation presented to the thurifer in a Solemn Procession with “360’s,” or to the Sacred Ministers wearing the glorious vestments of high feast days, there are no “stars” in worship. Even the Celebrant is simply fulfilling his appointed office. Nothing that happens in the liturgy should call attention to the person(s) carrying out the action – everything is directed, and should draw all the senses, to God.

Liturgy is subject to human failings, however. Perhaps the thurifer will absent-mindedly go up the wrong aisle, or out the west door when he was supposed to go around the corner. Rather than leave him to his own embarrassment, the graceful solution is simply to follow him, and hope to right his course with a discreet whisper or two before the procession finds itself heading toward the Public Garden. We may take our cue from cats, who (when not paying their respects to the High Altar) have the gift of falling off the back of the sofa and making it look as if they intended to do that all along. In short, rather than call attention to our mistakes, we try to carry on with minimal disruption to the flow of the service. It is the intention, rather than the execution, that matters; the enthusiastic but tone-deaf communicant may be making a frightful racket to his more musically inclined pew-mate’s ear, but in his own heart he is making a joyful noise unto the Lord, and that is what counts. And so we offer our worship to God with sincere hearts and the prayer that He will accept our offerings of prayer and praise and “pardon the imperfection of our service.”

Mercifully hear us, O Father, as we plead the sacrifice of Thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and grant that the feebleness of our intention may be perfected in the fullness of that intention wherewith He offered himself upon the altar of the Cross; who now liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.