

THE PASTOR'S DESK

May 9, 2010 - Why Do You Do That?



Dear Parishioners,

If our Lord could say of the generation at the time he walked the earth "This generation demands a sign," perhaps it could be said of the people of our time that "This generation demands a full explanation." In our modern time, scientific/mathematical precision and proof has become the paradigm of knowledge. When you grasp a mathematical proof, you know something that is certain and unchanging. We seek to know all things with mathematical precision and certainty. Unfortunately, most things are not known that way. What is the formula for a pleasant day with friends; for a bittersweet memory of a lost loved one; for a child dreaming of Christmas morning; for washing the family car with your son? Human action defies formulas and proofs.

In any situation we have an almost infinite possibility for different actions. Is there something that can be said of all human action? Yes, most of what we do, we do in order to bring about a desired state-of-affairs. We want a clean car, so we wash our car. We want a sandwich, so we go to the kitchen and put meat, cheese, and mustard between two pieces of bread. We want to support our families, so we get in the car early in the morning and fight the traffic on I-270. None of these actions are done for its own sake. They are done to bring about the situation desired. All of our actions are either done for their own sake (hobbies, gestures of affection, sports, for example) or in order to bring about some other situation (the examples above).

Because our possibility for action in every situation is so broad, for every human action the question can be asked "Why do you do that?" It may be obvious that someone is washing his car and you may presume that the final situation he wants to bring out is the car being clean. But, he may have a further end in view: he wants to sell the car, he's taking it to a show, he's going out on a date and wants to make a good impression, etc. So, even in obvious situations, the question "What are you doing?" can be asked.

In the reform of the Mass in the last forty years, almost everything that happens at Mass is now done in the vernacular language and in the sight of the congregation. With everything happening so present and obvious, the question "Why do you do that?" has become more common.

When we ask this question of the liturgy, though, we need to realize that the Mass is not like washing your car and driving down the freeway.

The Mass is more like something done for its own sake, like a gesture of love. It is akin to a husband and wife kissing each other. One may ask them "Why do you do that?" "Why do you touch your lips together?" Their answer will simply be "Because we love each other." But, "why touch lips together." Well, there's no answer to that, other than "just because." Somehow, touching lips together has become the way for a man and woman to express their love for each other. We'll never get the proof or the formula for that.

The liturgy of the Church is something that has grown up organically. Just as a kiss has become a way for a couple to express their love for each other, so the Mass is an expression of the love of the Son for the Father. That is what it is. The rites, actions, and words that have come from the life of the Church express this mystery. All other effects of the Mass flow from this. We can discern many intermediate ends: the building up of the community, subjective feelings of the congregants, the expression of our faith, etc. But, if we try to make these intermediate ends the final ends, or if we try to reduce the Mass to something we can fully explain, we are not being faithful to the true final end of the liturgy.

In the Last Supper Discourse in the Gospel of St. John, Our Lord says something that I have been reflecting on for a while now: "but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." John 14:31. The Mass is, I believe, the way Our Lord is fulfilling this command throughout history. The Mass is the sacramental action by which Our Lord makes present for us His perfect gesture of love to His Father, His sacrifice on the Cross. The Mass lets us know how much the Son loves the Father. In the Mass, we become part of the sacrifice of love of the Son to the Father and we know, then, how much the Son loves the Father. If we are conscious of this, and seek to join ourselves in the perfect gesture of love from the Son to the Father, all the other effects will flow from that.

**God bless,
Fr. LaHood**