

THE NEW ROMAN MISSAL – SACRED SPACE – PART I

Way back when, in the Old Testament book of Exodus, Moses finds himself in the desert, gazing at that famous burning bush and hearing the voice of God commanding him: “Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” Even there, in the barren waste, a sense of sacred space could be seen and felt. But more importantly, perhaps, the message that one had to behave differently—and even dress differently—in the presence of the sacred was communicated in that life-changing encounter between Moses and the Lord.

As I pointed out last week, ordinary places—like a spot in the desert or the corner of a park—can become sacred because of what **we** do or experience there. Other places are, by their very nature, sacred. Churches, mosques and synagogues are the obvious examples. But other places, too, evoke a sense of the sacred and demand different behavior from those who enter in. Cemeteries come to mind. But consider what happened at Arlington National Cemetery in the midst of the goofy Pokémon-go craze last year. People actually had to be reminded that this was sacred space, an inappropriate place for game playing. And you might recall the story I told last summer about my visit to the Lincoln Memorial where signs had to be posted—and mostly ignored by visitors—inviting “Respect; silence please.”

We call our own sacred space here at St. Joseph the *church*. It really takes its name from **us**: it is the place where **we**, the **Church** (with a capital “C”), gather to give praise and thanks to God. It is a sacred place because of what we do here; but it is sacred space even before we arrive and remains sacred when we leave. So it’s important to consider how we, as members of a very casual society, behave in a sacred environment. Some people get it, some don’t. One of the most wonderful experiences I had in my first few months here was at a baptism. The two-year-old sister of the child being baptized was being a typical two-year-old and started to run around a bit while pictures were being taken after the baptism. As she started to climb the steps into the sanctuary, her mother grabbed her, pulled her back down, and said: “No honey, that’s a special place.” I said that once to a child in another parish and the parent asked me why I hated children!

The more formal language we encounter in the *New Roman Missal* has hopefully given American Catholics an opportunity to consider and reclaim some of the attitudes that sacred space and speech and time demand. However, we definitely don’t need to return to an antiquated, pre-Vatican II mentality about church. Too much formality creates a disconnect between worship and everyday life, and we can be grateful that things like communion rails no longer separate the People of God from the sanctuary where only the ordained and the altar **boys** once entered in. On the other hand, too little formality can make our worship just one more activity in a busy week, so that the boundaries between the ball park, the Jewel, the gym and the church become blurred. But more about that next week....

Fr. Bob