

The Place of Ritual in Worship

[by Tim Concannon tel: 01730 267188]

I am a Roman Catholic. We do ritual in a big way, which means that bells'n'smells are us. Recently, I found myself in a very interesting position. It was a Holy Day of Obligation (on which Catholics are obliged to attend Mass) due to start at 11:30 am. I arrived (in true Catholic fashion) with less than 15 minutes in hand.

Ten minutes before Mass, shock and horror! No priest! No-one knew where he was, as he was a stand-in priest for our own who was away.

As the "Mr Fixit" of St Laurence, I was reminded that something had to be done. Mass cannot be celebrated by anyone who is not an ordained priest. There is, however, a form of service, which falls short of Mass, but allows the Sacrament to be distributed to the faithful by a properly commissioned Eucharistic Minister (of which I am one). In a slightly anxious council of war with the Sacristan, the Eucharistic Minister and sundry members of the congregation, I proposed that we should proceed with that particular form of worship. I read the Rubric to myself and mentally marked out those areas where I, as an unordained minister, could not preside. I appeared on the altar in an alb (white garment) and explained to the congregation what we intended to do.

Someone objected to me being vested, pointing out that vesting was the prerogative of the clergy. Nothing loth, I de-vested and suggested that he (the objector) should take the service, which, to his credit, he did. The problem then was that we could not find the appropriate Order of Service. I had my own views of what I would do with the Mass text. After some difficulty, and a detailed search by the parish secretary we managed to find one copy of the ordained order of service, which he used. I was delighted to see that the form of service, which we found, was exactly what I would have done from first principles.

What does this tell us? There are words that are important. That is a given. There are forms that are important. But at the end of the day, the most important commandment is "Fear God, and keep his Commandments. There is no more to man" (Eccl 12:9)

It was, as I believe, a valid act of worship. Was it a Mass? Certainly not. It did not purport to be but it was a way in which the congregation could participate in a formal act of worship of our saviour. In these latter days, I suspect that it is an example of the sort of worship that those of us from a more formal tradition should get used to.

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