

# CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

## How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Processions #6

Processions: The ordered movement of a liturgical assembly or its movement from one location to another, often accompanied by hymns. Processions occur regularly during liturgy.

Most Catholics think that the liturgy begins with the Sign of the Cross. However, liturgy begins the moment we arrive in the church parking lot. Indeed, there is wisdom in that, at least for the person who has given some thought beforehand to the scriptures assigned for the liturgy of the day.

Even from the viewpoint of time, space and distance, however, Mass does begin when we begin making our way, mentally, emotionally and physically to the place of worship. One might say that there are grand neighborhood processions that begin on Sunday mornings as Catholics from all directions drive or walk from their homes and converge on the parking lots of the church and from there make their way into the sacred precincts. Getting there is ultimately more than covering some ground between home and church. In the words of the psalms, it is "going up to the house of the Lord." Spiritually speaking, therefore, walking or traveling is a sacred experience.

It has obviously been done for centuries: People find the need to go from their homes, their domestic church, to the place where the entire community, the assembly, gathers for prayer and worship. It's called processing, making one's way from one place to another for a sacred purpose. Moslems have a word for it the Hajj, the once-in-a-lifetime journey to Mecca. Jewish people make their way to the holy Western Wall of the temple to pray. Christians also have been processing to their sacred shrines for centuries: Compostella, Fatima or Lisieux. There is obviously something that occurs at those sacred places which the Christian cannot experience at home. It is worth the time and effort to "get there."

Theologically and liturgically speaking, processions are a bodily or ritual expression of who we are and what we are about. We are pilgrims on a journey, a journey to God's kingdom. Indeed, all life, from birth to death, from baptism to last anointing is such a journey. For Roman Catholics there are also certain special processions within the sacred liturgy that are models or paradigms of the great pilgrimage we call life.

First, as pointed out earlier, we make our way as a community into the house of

the Lord. It is called the entrance procession. The ministers of the liturgy also make this procession to introduce the Mass, moving from the entrance of the church into the sanctuary to the accompaniment of song. The Book of the Gospels is carried in a place of honor in the procession as though to say Christ comes among his people. Later, at the time of the proclamation of the gospel, the deacon or priest, sometimes accompanied by acolytes and incense bearers, processes with the Book of the Gospels to the ambo from which the gospel is proclaimed.

Several other processions also occur at Mass: The peoples' offerings, the gifts of bread and wine to be set apart for Eucharist, are brought to the altar. Also, monetary offerings for the needs of the parish are brought forward. The assembly approaches the altar at communion time to partake of the sacred gifts which they have offered earlier. At the conclusion of Mass the entire assembly makes its way out of the church in a sending forth procession (hopefully not in a mass exodus) and returns once again to their homes, the domestic church.

Lastly, we Catholics also have a long tradition of special processions: On the Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion we commemorate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We process to adore the cross on Good Friday of the Lord's Passion. On the feast of Corpus Christi we process in adoration of the Lord's body and blood. Finally, we process as we celebrate sacraments: baptisms and weddings, as well as funerals. Processions are not just a way to get people or ministers from here to there. Truly, they are a ritual expression of who we are: God's pilgrim people on life's journey to the kingdom.