

"A Sacristan's View"

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As I began to pen this installment of "A View From the Pew" I couldn't help but be struck by the irony that my own view of this church has rarely ever been "from the pew". Until 2007, when Monsignor Mangello invited me to join the staff as a sacristan, my only view of St. Louis Church was from across the street, as a matter of fact, where the imposing stone façade and gothic spire of the City of Buffalo's grandest church loom large in the window of my office at the Catholic Center. Now that I have the honor to be an "insider", however, my view of our historic church is largely from behind the scenes, which is, in the case of this parish, quite a remarkable place to find oneself.

If you walk through the door behind the towering reredos of the great high altar, you'll enter my principal domain, the vast and mysterious sacristy of St. Louis Church. I say mysterious because I never cease to be amazed by the things I find in that room (not to mention the things I can never find when I need them). Wrapping all around the sanctuary, the sacristy is the room in which sacred liturgical vestments, vessels, linens, bells, books, and candles are lovingly stored in what seems like an infinite number of deep sliding drawers and impossibly lofty cabinets. One of the cabinets is so large, in fact, that it was able to be transformed into a lavatory. The sacristy is large enough to easily accommodate two conference tables and their chairs between walls of cabinets and vesting surfaces. Other furnishings include two massive brass candelabra bespangled with Napoleonic bees, two great velvet-embroidered double kneelers, and two splendidly carved throne chairs, one of which, I am told, once belonged to Buffalo's first bishop, The Rt. Rev. John Timon.



Awash in dark, intricately-carved woodwork and looking rather like a parliamentary robing chamber or perhaps the parlour of a gentlemen's club in Victorian London, the sacristy is the elegant but moody



enclave of those of us who work behind the scenes in order to present in dignified solemnity the liturgical ministrations of what Pius Parsch famously called the Church's Year of Grace. Here, the clergy vest day after day, year round, for the celebration of the liturgical rites, donning vestments that range from antique and ornate to contemporary and restrained in any of the four principal liturgical colors of white, green, violet, and red. Vestments of gold thread may sometimes replace white or red vestments on days of particular solemnity, and there are even black vestments from the pre-Conciliar days of Requiem Masses chanted in Latin.

The so-called "inferior ministers" of the liturgy (once commonly referred to as "altar boys" until the boys lost their exclusive monopoly on service at the altar) also vest in this room in their long white albs.

Lectors and cantors rehearse their readings and chants in the sacristy, too, before emerging to welcome the congregation and to introduce the liturgy's celebrant.

My job as a sacristan is to do all the "prep" work before the liturgical ceremonies commence, making sure everything is set up as it ought to be before our worship begins. Those of you who attend the 4:00 Vigil Mass on Saturdays will have seen me lighting candles and preparing chalices, books, and linens in the time before Mass begins. On weekdays at the noon liturgy or on Sundays, you will see others performing these tasks, as I am but one of a team of sacristans who assists the pastor in the preparation of liturgical activities. I do, however, lay claim to a unique task that the rest of my colleagues normally do not have the pleasure of attending to, namely weddings. St. Louis Church hosts, on average, 65 weddings each year, and it is my responsibility to conduct the rehearsals for each one. I am also present on the day of the wedding in order to coordinate it. I could write an essay about that task, alone, and I was originally tempted to do just that when approached to write this month's "A View From the Pew". There is nothing I could write about my experiences with weddings, however, that hasn't already been thoroughly explored by Hollywood in endless box office comedies. Although I'm convinced that I could write a screen play to top them all (and perhaps one day I will), suffice it to say that my task as parish wedding coordinator seldom provides me with anything remotely approaching a dull moment.

As special and rewarding as the coordination of weddings at this church may oftentimes be, my highest honor as a sacristan is to know that my labors contribute to the majesty of the worship of a God Whom I call, with humble confidence, my friend, and my greatest joy is to share His love with the many friends I have made while serving Him here. In the Great Litany of the ancient liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the celebrant prays "for this holy house and for those who enter it with faith, reverence, and the fear of God." "Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house," he continues, "glorify them in return by Your divine power; and do not forsake us who hope in You." This is my chronic prayer, also, whenever I have the happiness of being in this holy temple, in the presence of the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ with my dear friends and colleagues.

In ancient times when the Church was young, the Eucharist was celebrated in the context of a great meal called the "agape" (love feast). Later, the agape became a separate and distinct event from the celebration of the Body and Blood of the Lord, occurring immediately after the Eucharistic Liturgy. Liturgy ("the work of the people") was once a way of life for Christians, not just a moment of formal obligatory prayer to be observed once a week. The Liturgy of the Lord's Day used to be a two day long affair, in fact, beginning at least at the vesperal hour on the previous Saturday. In the Great Church at Constantinople, the Christian community was in the habit of processing all around the city carrying torches and singing hymns in an all-night vigil before finally ending up in the exonarthex (courtyard) of the cathedral to welcome the Patriarch for the solemn liturgical celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord. This was no sanitized and abbreviated American-style four hymn service, but rather a festal riot of music, incense, and light that lasted for hours upon hours upon hours.

Even after all that incredible expenditure of time and energy, nobody had any interest in seeing the celebration come to an end. At the deacon's dismissal, therefore, the celebration continued with the agape feast. In Middle Eastern cultures, this agape meal is often still celebrated after the Eucharist. The Greek Orthodox, too, insist upon stuffing their parishioners and visitors with food and plying them with drink after their liturgies. In the Roman Catholic Church of modern times, the agape is usually seen only in the most vestigial of forms as an occasional coffee and donut hour in the parish hall after Mass. That's unfortunate, it seems to me, because it is indeed right and just that our celebration continue beyond the last bar of the closing hymn of a 45 minute Mass. Our Christian Eucharist is meant to be a joyous

celebration of the love we have for God and for one another. It ought to continue, therefore, and not end in sudden solitude behind the wheel of an automobile as we speed home to resume our isolation within a lonely plastic fortress of 21st century suburbia.

In the case of the Saturday Vigil Mass at St. Louis Church, a number of us, therefore, gather for our own agape of sorts at any one of a handful of local purveyors of gladdening spirits and nourishing epicurea. When our formal liturgical worship is over, I take comfort in knowing that our celebration continues beyond the tall gothic walls of the Divine temple, out into the more intimate settings of various hospitable establishments which adorn this quaint neighborhood in the heart of our aging city. This, to me, is not something apart from our Eucharist by any means but is, instead, the normal extension of it, for if we are called by Jesus to love one another and to wash one another's feet in the Upper Room, it seems a tragic repeat of history that we should abandon Him immediately after He feeds us by abandoning one another.

In the sacristy of St. Louis Church in Buffalo, the solemn and joyful celebration of the Lord's Table begins for me in a vigil of labor every Saturday evening, reminding me of the great vigils of my fortunate ancestors of yore who gathered to give thanks when the Church was youthful and on fire with the Holy Spirit. It continues afterwards in the laughter and love of my friends, as it should; as it must. Christ commands as much. The love of God demands as much. My honor, therefore, is to serve the people of this unique community as a sacristan. My delight, however, is to celebrate with them as a brother and a friend. Join us after Mass if you don't already; we never go far. Look for me after Mass. I'm the last one out the door and I'll be happy to accompany you to wherever it may be that our celebration continues!

Peace be with you.