

What are processions and why do we have them? – A First Sunday Explanation

A procession is “a group of people (or vehicles) moving in one direction in an orderly fashion.” In a typical Eucharistic celebration we are likely to have opening and closing processions and perhaps a gospel procession as well. This tradition of orderly processions in the midst of worship is ancient and nearly universal. We come together to worship as a community, so it makes sense that things are done together. We sing together; we pray together. If several people need to go from one place to another, they do it together. We know the service has begun when the leaders of music and prayer enter the worship space. To lend dignity and perhaps solemnity to the service, this is done in a carefully organized way, and often with vestments (special symbolic clothing). Typically a procession in the church is led by a processional cross (one on a pole suitable for carrying) and torches (candles on similar, shorter poles). Wherever we go, we are following the cross of Christ, which lights our way. Following ancient tradition, the clergy come at the end of the procession, with the Bishop (if present) last. The Deacon, as the one uniquely charged with reading the Gospel, either carries the Gospel Book, held high for all to see, or follows an Acolyte carrying the lifted Gospel Book. If there is incense, this always leads the procession, symbolizing the blessing of our worship. These liturgical processions are the only remnant in most of our lives of earlier lifestyles in which such processions (like parades) would occur whenever a monarch or other important person came to a place. Our processions remind us both of the seriousness of our worship, and of the respect due to the whole activity. Our worship begins with a procession which may include the choir, Eucharistic ministers, and additional symbols such as banners, and ends similarly. Ending with the procession reminds us that we are all going forth into the world to love and serve. We do not go home, leaving all of the ministers of worship to stay at Church. The Gospel procession reminds us of the unique place readings from these four books about Jesus have in our faith and worship. The Gospel Book is lifted high and carried out into the midst of the congregation (since it is a gift to all people), where it is read for all to hear. Typically it is led by the cross and torches (and perhaps incense), as in any other procession. But in this case the torches stand on either side of the book, providing light for the reading, while the cross stands behind the person holding the book, marking the place where the Gospel is even for those who may not be able to see because of people around them.

There are other special processions in our church lives. We are all familiar with wedding processions, beginning the marriage liturgy with a symbolic coming together. Funeral processions typically include the same elements as every day processions, with the addition of the casket or urn, ushered in by the priest and placed before the altar. The closing procession at a funeral may go just from the sanctuary to the back, just as in an ordinary service, but it can also go all the way to the place of burial (columbarium or church yard or cemetery). So this procession may begin on foot and end on foot, but have

an extended middle portion in vehicles. Candlelight processions are common both in the church and from the church into the community on special occasions such as Christmas or Candlemas or the Easter Vigil. Here we are taking the light of Christ into the world. Similarly, it is common to have a Palm Sunday procession which includes the entire congregation and may go some distance around the neighborhood before coming into the church. Here we are reenacting Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem before he was crucified. So our processions speak symbolically of what we believe, of our relationships with God, the world, and one another. They are part of the beauty and tradition of our worship.