

First Sunday Explanation: Why Do You Do That?

Do you sometimes wonder what to do and why during worship? Some practices arouse curiosity in individuals not familiar with them. Some people are totally comfortable crossing themselves, bowing, genuflecting, etc. Some people find all of these practices a bit alien. In between are a great variety of practices. Our tradition recognizes that it can be helpful to use our whole selves in worship. Unlike strictly intellectual traditions where everyone sits and listens and thinks for the whole of a worship experience, we use our bodies and all our senses. We stand and sit and sometimes kneel; we move from one place to another. We taste and smell. We have music of various kinds, flowers, plants, and beautiful vestments and vessels.

Each thing we add to worship and each action we perform during worship is intended to enhance our connection to God, to express our relationship and help it grow. Therefore, we should not do things because everyone else does, but only because they make sense to us. Sometimes when people do not know why something is done, but find it attractive, they develop a symbolism for themselves. This is entirely appropriate. You have probably heard saying such as, “The light goes out from the cross and returns to it” as a way to recall the customary order of lighting candles. This gives meaning to a ritual with a theological truth. Someone else might have a different saying that gives meaning to the same ritual.

One thing that arouses confusion is why people bow at some mentions of the Trinity, but cross themselves at others. This is actually quite simple. It has become traditional among some Christians to cross themselves at any invocation of the Trinity (“In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”). Some people refer to this as blessing themselves. What it means to most people is a personal connection to God expressed in this formula and in particular a personal allegiance to Christ who died on the cross. You could think of it as “God is with me and I am with God”. So why do the same people bow at other mentions of the Trinity? This comes from a tradition of reverence. In Isaiah and Revelation we see all the hosts of heaven bowing before God, a worship we symbolically join when we bow at the repetition of their words “Holy, holy, holy” in the Eucharist. Similarly, whenever there is a doxology (“Praise to the Father...” or “Glory to the Father...”) bowing represents that same reverence, that same joining in heavenly adoration.

We are a worshipping community, not a drill team. So it is entirely appropriate that some people kneel when others stand; some people raise their hands while others do not; some people hold hands while others keep their hands free. This is part of the delight of our richly varied community, evidence of the lovely diversity of God’s creation.