

SACRED vs. PROFANE: Restoring a Sense of the “Sacred”

Understanding the difference between what the Church means by “sacred” and “profane” will help us to better understand how to approach church with greater reverence, as a *sacred* place.

If we were to ask most people what the word “profane” means, I think they would say it means something vulgar, like “profanity.” But when the Church speaks of what is “profane,” it means something quite different. In church language, “profane” simply means what is “ordinary,” as distinguished from that which is “sacred.” Sacred items have been set apart for God or the worship of God. “Profane” simply refers to everything else.

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One of the ways we give glory and honor to the Creator of all things is by setting aside some things to use only for worship. The act of separating something from a common or ordinary (profane) use for a sacred use is called “consecration.” “Sacred” simply means set apart for God. To “consecrate” means to make sacred (holy). Thus, when something is consecrated, it is set apart for God and is no longer used for ordinary purposes.

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The sense of vulgarity comes into play when you take something that has been consecrated to God and use it for an ordinary, or even bad purpose. Consider this verse from the Old testament, where

God faults priests for not preserving a sense of the sacred: *“Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common.”* (Ezekiel 22:26)

If you use an ordinary (profane) item for ordinary (profane) use, you do nothing wrong or vulgar. But if you use a sacred item that has been set aside for the worship of God for ordinary use, then you are doing something vulgar and wrong. To use a sacred item for an ordinary purpose is to disrespect its sacred quality (that it has been set apart for God or His worship). By doing so, you profane what is holy or desecrate what is sacred. An act of treating something sacred as if it were not, is called “profanation” or “desecration.”

An example of this would be if you took a sacred chalice from Mass to use at a dinner party. Because the chalice has been consecrated (set aside for the worship of God), it may not be used for ordinary purposes.¹ To knowingly do so would be wrong. It would be an act of profanation, or desecration.

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Also consider how we use the altar in church. Canon Law tells us: *“An altar... must be reserved for divine worship alone, to the absolute exclusion of any profane (ordinary) use.”* (Can. 1239 §1) In other words, you would not use the altar in church as a common stand for a slide projector to show pictures. It is used only for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

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Sacred Liturgical Services

Understanding this distinction between what is sacred and ordinary (profane) helps us as we look at how to celebrate the sacred liturgy. The 2004 Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*² asks us to affirm, respect and preserve the sacred nature of the place, persons and actions and all that is part of a liturgical rite, especially the celebration of the Blessed Eucharist. Pope Pius XII, quoting Pope Pius X, said that liturgical services should be characterized by *“sacredness, which abhors any profane influence.”*³ Pope Saint John Paul II reaffirmed this: *“The celebration of the Liturgy... must be characterized by a profound sense of the sacred... permeated by reverence and by the sense of awe that comes from knowing that one is in the presence of the majesty of God.”*⁴ Unfortunately however, today we seem to have lost a “sense of the sacred.”

¹ Canon Law stipulates that, “Sacred objects, which are designated for divine worship... are to be treated reverently and are not to be employed for profane or inappropriate use even if they are owned by private persons.” (Can 1117)

² From the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament (2004)

³ Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (1947), 168

⁴ Pope Saint John Paul II, address to the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on September 21, 2001, #3

Restoring a Sense of the Sacred through Reverence and Awe

It seems that maintaining a proper “sense of the sacred” has always been a challenge. We note that St Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 11:20) was unhappy about the tone of certain celebrations. He wanted to re-establish the Corinthians' sense of holiness in their gatherings (cf. 1 Cor 11:23). The Book of Hebrews tells us we must “worship with reverence and awe; for indeed, our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12:28-29) When Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple he was trying to restore a sense of the sacred, telling them that his Father’s house is to be a house of prayer.



We must strive to preserve a sense of the sacred in our churches, which are consecrated places, dedicated to the encounter and worship of our Lord and Savior who is really, truly and substantially present. **Pope Saint John Paul II spoke of our need to move beyond certain misunderstandings of liturgical renewal after Vatican II, “especially by entering more deeply into the contemplative dimension of worship, which includes the sense of awe, reverence and adoration... [which are] fundamental attitudes in our relationship with God.”**

Church as a Sacred Space, not for ordinary activities

The church is a sacred space, set aside for worship. “Only those things which serve the exercise or promotion of worship, piety, or religion are permitted in a sacred place; anything not consonant with the holiness of the place is forbidden...” (Can 1210) This is why we don’t eat and drink ordinary food in church or engage in normal conversations as if we were in our own homes. This is why we do not wear ordinary clothes (like we would wear to a picnic, ball game or around the house) to Sunday Mass but rather, our *Sunday best* for the worship of God. Immodest, casual, or sloppy dress for Sunday Mass is not appropriate because it fails to respect that this time and place has been set aside for the worship of God and not for some other, ordinary purpose.

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“To the homeless man who comes in from the street in his poor clothing, we say ‘Welcome.’ To the person who rushes over after work and hasn’t had a chance to change, we say, ‘No problem.’ But, to the people who get dressed on a Sunday morning knowing they are coming to Mass, we say, please, please... ‘Worship the Lord in holy attire!’ (Ps. 96: 9) God is worth it!”⁵

Reverent Silence and Prayer

Because a church is set aside for prayer and the worship of God, it is not a place to engage in ordinary or casual conversation. This is why we avoid talking in church, turn off our cell phones, and try to observe a reverent silence before and after Mass so that people can pray. The church is not an assembly hall for social gatherings. It is a house of prayer.

This does not mean that we do not wish to be welcoming or that a subdued, few words cannot take place. But when we understand that a church is a sacred space set aside for prayer and the worship of God, and that it is not to be used for ordinary (profane) use, then we realize that to use this sacred space for casual conversation is to profane what is holy.

We should not take a sacred space, set aside for the worship of God, and use it for an ordinary purpose. The General

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Instruction of the Roman Missal (par. 45) instructs us that before the celebration of the Mass, “it is a praiseworthy practice for silence to be observed in the

church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred celebration in a devout and fitting manner.”

The action of promoting greater reverence in church begins with us—with our own disposition to cultivate a renewed sense of the sacred as we seek to honor the Lord in His House of Worship. A renewed sense of the sacred will help us to understand why we do not talk, dress and act in church as we would in a social hall or at our own homes. Let’s try to restore a sense of sacred reverence and awe in church and treat church as it truly is – a sacred space dedicated to the worship of God – and not an ordinary place where we dress, talk, and act as we do everywhere else.

⁵ Fr. Thomas G. Morrow, “Worship the Lord in Holy Attire” From the Jul/Aug 2003 Issue of Lay Witness Magazine.