ST. ANDREW'S LEAFLETS

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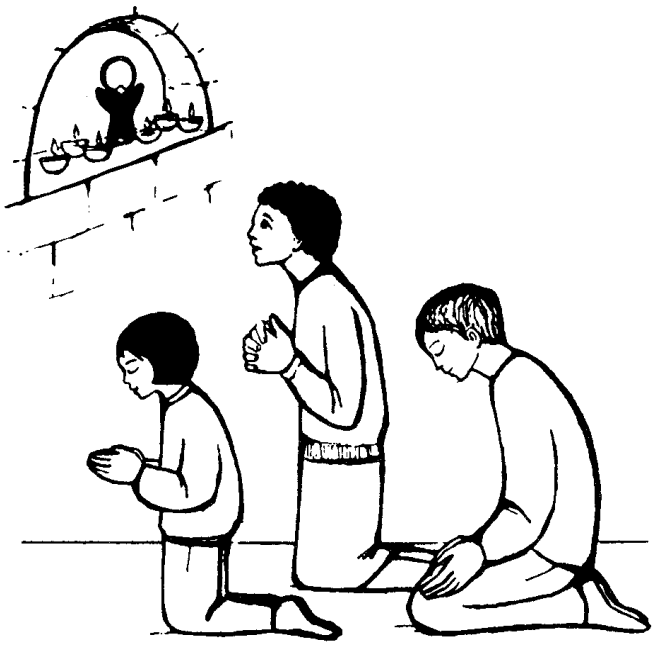
TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS AND DEVOTIONS



AN INTRODUCTION TO WAYS IN WHICH CHRISTIANS CAN PERSONALISE THEIR FAITH

INTRODUCTION

For many of us, the weekly gathering of the faithful to share in the Eucharist is the focus and centre of our prayer and the expression of our devotion.

Since earliest times, those who seek to respond to God's presence in all things have developed many customs and traditions to help them personalise and give expression to their faith. This has happened in every religion and Christians, wanting to 'touch' God at a personal level, have also developed many helpful customs and traditions to help them realise the presence of the Divine. In popular devotion the use of what are called 'Sacramentals' plays a large part. These are associated with or imitate the Church's official rituals and unfold daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. They express the sacred nature of created things and include religious signs, symbols, public and private devotions, prayers, gestures, images etc. This short booklet is intended to introduce and explain some of them.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The Sign of the Cross came into use as a personal gesture during the Middle Ages. It takes several forms. The 'big' signing, made with the whole hand and touching first the forehead, then the breast, left shoulder and, finally, right shoulder, is often accompanied with the words, "In the name of the Father, + and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Whilst being used at various times at Mass and in other public liturgies, it is a means whereby people can express their personal faith at other times, as well. On entering a church (usually with Holy Water) or beginning a journey, before going to sleep or on waking, at the news of a death or as a funeral passes: a lay person may also make the Sign of the Cross over another person to reassure them of God's love. In whatever circumstance, the Sign is a personalised reminder and acceptance of all that our Faith teaches about the love of God manifested in the Passion of Christ.

HOLY WATER

It is also customary to make the Sign of the Cross in Holy Water on entering and leaving a church. Water that has been blessed through a special Rite, or which has been used at Baptism, is used to remind us of that formative event in our Christian journey. It is also used as a sign of absolution at the beginning of Mass and to bless people or objects. People often keep Holy Water in their homes and may have a small bowl of it near their front door. When a person moves into a new home it is an ancient custom for it to be blessed with Holy Water. It is also used to bless graves, especially on the Commemoration of All Souls (Nov. 2nd).

GENUFLECTING
This is a profound sign of respect offered to our Lord in His Most Holy Sacrament. One genuflects (briefly kneeling onto the right knee) whenever one passes the Tabernacle, which contains the Blessed Sacrament. A burning white light indicates the presence of Christ in his Sacrament. The Sacrament may also be reserved in an Aumbry (wall safe) or Hanging Pyx (a container usually suspended over an altar). In this way an individual acknowledges the presence of Jesus, realises themselves to be in the proximity of a Divine Mystery and takes to heart that heaven is contained under the form of bread and wine (although it is only the former that is Reserved). One also genuflects whenever the Sacrament passes during Processions of the Blessed Sacrament.

It is also customary to genuflect at Midnight Mass on coming to the words in the Gospel of John, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." as well as during the Creed when we come to the similar passage. On Good Friday it is customary to genuflect when the death of our Lord is remembered during the Reading of the Passion Gospel.

BOWING
A 'profound' (deep) bow remains the custom for Orthodox Christians instead of genuflecting. In the West it is a popular tradition to bow slightly when the name of Jesus (and, sometimes, Mary) is mentioned in the Liturgy. The profound bow can always substitute for a genuflection.

Both are symbolic of one's response to the presence of God. These devotional gestures were borrowed from court etiquette and remain in use in this country in the form of the curtsy or bow to the monarch. They are a modified form of a prostration.

RAISING OF EYES AND HANDS
These are gestures of prayer. God has traditionally been pictured as dwelling above creation and it is natural, therefore, to raise one's eyes upwards in prayer. Jesus is described as praying in this way: "He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke (the loaves and fishes)" *(Matthew 14:19)*.

For the same reasons, it w3as the custom of Christians from the earliest times to pray with the hands raised upwards, often with palms open in a gesture of receiving or giving. There is evidence for this gesture in catacomb paintings. This was always the prayer position of priests at the altar and has been revived among many people today.

STANDING
Some people complain that there is too much standing instead of keeling during Mass. Standing, however, is the most ancient of liturgical positions. It was the ordinary bodily position at worship for almost the first thousand years of Christianity.

Standing is a natural expression of respect, reverence and readiness. All religions in ancient times used this position at worship. Christianity spread its early roots in a culture where kneeling was the position of servitude and slavery. Standing straight, tall and free as baptised children of God had special meaning to them. Only for a brief moment before the Presider's official prayer of the day did people kneel. Even this exception was cancelled on all Sundays and during the Easter season in honour of the Resurrection. During the Eucharistic Prayer and blessings, the posture of the people was one of deep bowing. Standing during the reading of the Gospel has remained the norm for the proclamation of the Word of God affirms the presence of God, just as it is made manifest through the Eucharistic Prayer for which, once again, we stand.

SITTING
There is no particular religious significance to the position of sitting. It is a posture of receptive listening and resting. It became popular in the West for the listening parts of the Mass (the Readings and sermon) only after the introduction of pews in the 16th cent.

KNEELING
Kneeling has been a popular devotional position only during modern times. There always was, however, a tradition of kneeling for prayer. St. Paul is described thus when joining with Christians at Miletus *(Acts 20:36)*. Kneeling was gradually introduced into the Liturgy as a sign of penance, supplication, and adoration. Kneeling during Mass was influenced by a growing emphasis on the Divinity of Christ and human unworthiness. In the West it gradually became the normal position throughout Mass from the 9th cent., except during the reading of the Gospel. Since the Liturgical reforms inaugurated by Vatican II, changes were made to restore a more balanced understanding of our relationship with God.

Kneeling has never been the norm in the Orthodox world and, with a growing understanding of their spirituality, the church in the West is returning to an earlier, and more universal, use of posture during the Mass.

LIGHTS

Since ancient times, light has reminded people of all religions of divine presence, joy, happiness, purity, life and a spirit of celebration.

A symbolism of light entered Christianity from Jewish customs and pagan ceremonies. Jews kept a perpetually burning light in the Temple sanctuary until its destruction in 70 AD. They also burned lights before the tombs of prophets, and displayed them during their festivals. The Jewish Feast of *Hanukkah*, recalling the rededication of the Temple, is called the 'Feast of Lights'. Sacred meals, such as the Seder during Passover and weekly Sabbath meal, called for a ritual of lighting lamps.

The symbolism of light versus darkness is an obvious theme in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It describes God *(Baruch 5:9; Ezekiel 13:21; I Samuel 3:3)*. In the Gospels, light becomes the symbol that describes the incarnate God in Jesus: "The light shines on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it." *(John 1:5)*, and "the real light which gives light to every person *(John 1:9)*. Jesus describes himself as light: "I am the Light of the world. No follower on mine shall ever walk in darkness: *(John 8:12)* and "I have come to the world as its light, to keep anyone who believes in me from remaining in the dark." *(John 12:46)*

With this extensive scriptural symbolism supporting their spirituality, it is understandable that Christians throughout the centuries should be preoccupied with lights. One of the pervading themes of the Christmass season is the theme of light coming into the world of darkness. The very first words of Scripture proclaimed at the Midnight Mass of Christmass are: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." *(Isaiah 9:1)*. The theme is carried out seasonally by way of religious traditions beginning with the Advent Wreath and continuing with Christingle celebrations and, finally, the lights on our Christmass trees.

CANDLES

The theme of light is also obvious in the practical and symbolic use of candles. The first evidence of their use as sacramentals comes from the 2nd cent., an ancient daily evening prayer service at the twelfth hour (6pm) in homes and house-churches. The ritual is called *Lucernare* (from the Latin, *lux*, 'light'). This practice evolved into Vespers (Evening Prayer), one of the Daily Hours. It is also considered as the origin of the Blessing of the Easter Fire and Paschal Candle.

Christians carried candles in funeral processions from the 3rd cent. onwards, burned them at the tombs of martyrs and other dead, and, from the 4th cent, before

the relics and images of saints. When, because of persecution, people gathered for worship in the Catacombs, candles were practical fixtures.

Candles continued to be a feature of public worship. Only from the 7th cent., however, is there evidence of their symbolic use at Mass. By then they were carried in the opening and gospel processions and placed around the altar.

In the 11th cent. they were placed on the altar for the first time. There was a civic tradition of carrying lights in front of high-ranking officials and, once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it eventually became obvious that lights, or candles, should honour the most important person in the church, Christ himself, symbolised by the altar. The white candle that is kept burning before the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, a tradition that began in England in the 13th cent. and is now obligatory everywhere, reflects this meaning.

VOTIVE CANDLES

Votive lights (Latin *votum*, or 'vow') and Vigil lights (Latin *vigilia*, 'waiting' or 'watching') are symbolic of two purposes of prayer. The former is associated with seeking some favour from our Lord, Mary, or a saint in return for something offered, sometimes a vow, more often a monetary offering to the church. They are lit on a 'pricket' stand. Vigil lights are burnt in front of shrines, icons, of holy images. Blue to indicate devotion to Mary, red for other saints.

VESTMENTS

Another sacramental began to grace the church's rituals – and the persons of the clergy – when vestments became popular in the 4th cent. Originally, the clergy wore what was common among the middle-classes. There came a time when conservative clergy continued to wear what had passed out of fashion. The *alb* (Latin *alba*, 'white') was the basic everyday garment, similar to a toga; the *amice* (a scarf around the neck), the *cincture* (a belt), the *maniple* (a handkerchief), the *chasuble* (a kind of coat) and the *stole* (a Roman civic symbol of authority). Today, the president of the Mass usually only wears an alb and chasuble, along with a stole.

The colour of vestments worn is determined by the season or commemoration and, in the West, normally follows the following tradition:

White (or gold) The seasons of Easter and Christmass together with Feasts of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary and non-martyred saints. Also at special solemnities outside these times. Sometimes at funerals.

Purple	The seasons of Advent and Lent, at Requiem Masses and funerals, special penitential days, such as Rogation and Ember Days. For the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession).
Red	On Good Friday, the Feasts of Pentecost and Martyrs
Green	'Ordinary' Sundays and weekdays in the year.
Black	Traditionally worn on Good Friday, at Requiem Masses and at funerals. This is less common today as it does not reflect the Christian hope of the Resurrection of the dead.

(Much of this material is taken from, 'Catholic Customs and Traditions' by Greg Dukes. 23rd Publications. ISBN 0-89622-409-0)