

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”: “Why do they do that?”

For our diocese’s “Year of the Eucharist,” let’s now consider some people’s questions about Mass rituals:

Why does the priest wash his hands before the prayer over the gifts at the altar?” Although it may seem obvious (washing one’s hands before handling food to wipe away germs), there is a more spiritual reason behind this priestly action. As he washes his hands over the bowl called the lavabo (Latin for “I shall wash”), the priest quietly prays: “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Thus, the priest is asking God to purify his soul, so that he may worthily offer sacrifice on behalf of God’s children who gather in the celebration.

“Why do people bow or genuflect as they approach to receive Communion?” This is done as a sign of deep reverence for the gift of Christ Himself Who is present in the Body and Blood we’re about to receive. Even if people do not choose to receive both, they should at least acknowledge the sacred presence of Our Lord with a simple bow as they move towards or move on by the Body and Blood of Christ.

“Why do we have a Penitential Rite near the beginning of Mass?” After the sign of the cross and the greeting, the presiding priest leads people to quietly and briefly reflect on any sins they may have committed. Then the priest or deacon often speaks a three-part formula, with the people echoing his words of: “Lord, have mercy/Christ have mercy/Lord have mercy.” An alternative formula is the “Confiteor” (so named for the 1st word in the Latin translation of this prayer, meaning “I confess.”) This prayer starts: ‘I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do...’

After either formula, Christ offers His merciful forgiveness in the person of the presiding priest through these words, expressing our hope: May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” Through this, worshippers ask God to purify their lives from any sinful thoughts, words or deeds, in order to more worthily celebrate the sacred mysteries in the Mass. It is important to recognize that we are all sinners in need of our Savior Jesus Christ, and we humbly beseech God to mercifully forgive and cleanse us, so that we may more readily live the holy life that Jesus calls us to live through our Baptism into the Body of Christ as children of God.

As St. Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians:

“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup.” (11:27-28). Keep in mind that this Rite doesn’t replace the Sacrament of Reconciliation, although venial (less serious) sins are forgiven and absolved during the Mass celebration. Mortal sins must be brought to

the confessional before receiving Communion.

“Who do Catholics strike their breast during the Confiteor in the Penitential Rite?” This tapping of one’s breast 3 times with a clenched fist occurs when the part of “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” is said. It symbolizes repentance—to bring to light any hidden sins seated in our hearts, so that God may purify us and make us more worthy to celebrate Mass. Luke records this gesture in 18:13 (the tax collector repenting) and in 23:48 (witnesses to Jesus’ death returning home). (by Fr. Steve Lape)

