

## The Loss of Solemnity – Loss of Identity?

Earlier in the year I had a conversation with a lay person of another parish.

She went on to say that they had a great Australia Day celebration on Sunday. No hymns, but singing some great Australian songs. At the end of the service the priest left the sanctuary and jumped down the aisle like a kangaroo. In another case I was visiting someone in a hospital, as I could not find them, I assumed they were attending a Mass in the hospital chapel. The Mass was at the offertory stage, so I sat at the back of the chapel and watched and prayed. The whole thing was a disaster, as the priest was constantly turning his head to look at the congregation with his hands alternating between a clasp to a full extension, without any connection to the prayers or at what stage the order of the service was at. This finally ended with the priest consecrating the host – but not the chalice. So, what is the problem? It would be easy to say that the new form of the Mass in the Australian Prayer Book was at fault, and that everyone should return to the older form. The real difference is not which prayer book, but between worship that is formal, with solemnity and devotion for focus and attention – and a worship that is careless, slipshod and superficial with a loss of focus.

In the case of the kangaroo the priest had forgotten whom they are and Whom they represent and a forgetfulness about intention – why are we here and what we are doing? They had ceased being a priest offering Divine Worship to God, and reduced the Mass to a form of entertainment – and focus moved away from our Lord to the presiding clown. In the second case, we have an all-pervasive disease of fear of ritual and ceremony. This important tradition of liturgy is a way of helping the priest and people to remain focussed on why they gather. A simple example of this in the old form of worship is that on six occasions the priest says to the people. “The Lord be with you” and the response “And with thy spirit”, which in each case is a form of blessing at the beginning of each stage of the Mass – not a ‘hello’ greeting. The priest in the old form makes about 50 signs of the cross (over himself, the people, the Gospel Book, and the Bread and Wine before and after the consecration) this number seems excessive, but each time this is done it is a reminder of why we are gathered and for what reason: the celebration of the Sacrifice that saves us. This includes forgiveness of our failings, a renewal of our Baptismal identity, growth in our attaining to the fullness and stature of Christ and intercession for and of the world – all because we enter the Holy of Sacrifice and Resurrection by the Cross that makes this all possible. It is a constant reminder of what we are supposed to be doing. I could go on about the music that is self-congratulatory, vessels that are cheap and nasty, and vestments of poor design and not expensive fabric (anything will do if it is cheap), all of which detract and diminish from the dignity and seriousness of what the Mass is all about.

To regain our identity, the purpose and why we gather on a Sunday, we need to reverse the slipshod and superficial way we gather before the Lord, and value the great Anglican tradition of Divine Worship that is ordered and beautiful, and as a worthy offering to our Lord.

I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house and the place where Thy glory dwelleth. Psalm 26:8