

REVERENCE

GATHERING ARIGHT

...all true culture begins with the fact that man steps back. That he does not obtrude himself and seize hold of things, but leaves a space, so that there may be a place in which the person in his dignity, the work in its beauty, and nature in its symbolic power may be discerned.

Romano Guardini *Learning the Virtues That Lead You to God*

Maybe it's the final sibilance, that last soft 'c,' but the word reverence makes most of us nervous, as though the word itself was whispering "Ssh." Like children in a china shop, we are afraid we will break something and be in trouble. In fact, the German word for reverence, *ehrfurcht*, combines the two words for honor and fear. The fear that is reverence is not the fear of violence or punishment. Rather, it is the solemn fear one feels at the foot of a mountain. It is the awe one feels on the shore of the sea. One may love the mountains and the ocean, but the wise person knows that she will never master the mountain; he will never control the sea. In all their beauty, they are beyond our ability either to create or to control.

For Christians, reverence is the virtue that acknowledges that there is One before whom we must bow the head and bend the knee. Reverence teaches us, as do the mountains and the sea, that we neither create nor control nor command the creator of the mountains and the sea. It is the virtue that acknowledges mysteries beyond our ability—not to know—but to know fully, completely, and so master them. We do not understand God; we stand under God, and so seek to grow in the knowledge of God. Reverence brings forth, not shamed silence, but awed silence. Reverence orders the universe, and helps us understand: God, and not we, is at its center. Reverence "leaves the space" in which we can worship.



A Crowd Is Not A Community

Few of us are ever alone. "Hermit" is not an option on the census form. Apartment dwellers share laundry rooms. Neighbors call to warn the people across the fence about their noisy children or barking dog. We spend our days commuting with others, bodies pressed uneasily against one another on the bus or carpooling with the driver who controls the radio and keeps it on the one station others cannot bear to hear.

We spend our days working with and living near others, and yet most of us know little about those men and women beyond their names and jobs or addresses. We stream to the mall where we shop in mobs; people whose voices and faces may be heard and seen but never registered. We stand in line at the store counter behind the tattooed teen and his pierced companion. We edge back in, but do not meet. We live in crowds; do we also live in community?

To find oneself at the mall on the Friday after Thanksgiving is to find oneself in a crowd, both literally and figuratively. We cannot know what has brought all these people here. We cannot know what they hope to find. Some are shopping, some are exercising by jogging the shop circuit. Some want out of a house overfilled with holiday guests. We hear scraps of conversations: laughter, an argument, a parent admonishing a child not to wander. We come separately and leave separately. Most of us strain to be spared a touch or a word from the stranger next to us.

Sunday Morning

But on Sunday mornings we wake with an intention and a destination. We rise and dress with a purpose. We know that, all over the neighborhood and town, in snug houses and drafty shelters, men and women are rising with the same purpose. Many, perhaps, most of them, are people we do not know, but they are not strangers. They cannot be strangers because they share our intention and our purpose. We are of one will and heart.

We, and they, are preparing to gather as brothers and sisters—all of us born in the waters of baptism—to celebrate the Eucharist, just as Christians have done for two thousand years. Different countries, different languages, different ethnicities, still we keep what Christians have always kept: A gathering, on the Lord's Day, to take and bless and share the Body and Blood of Christ. Our intention gives shape to our preparation; our intention takes shape in our preparation.

Just as the Gathering Rites at Mass “help the assembled people to become a worshipping community and to prepare them for listening to God's word and celebrating the eucharist,” so our domestic practices can help us prepare. These domestic practices help us “step back” from thoughtless routines and so create a space in which to gather, not as a crowd, but as a community.

We have an ancient practice of fasting to prepare for Mass. Fasting helps us “leave a space,” in which reverence may flourish and grow. Fasting helps sharpen our hunger for the feast to which we are invited. Even those who do not know or keep religious fasts understand the importance of the practice. Americans planning to sit at a groaning Thanksgiving table will eat sparingly, if at all, before the meal. It is not law or custom that commands them, but common sense. They want to come empty to the table, hungry for the sight and smell and taste of the food set before them. They know that only good and hungry can they appreciate the feast.

The traditional fasting from food before Mass is, in many ways, no different from the pre-Thanksgiving fast. Only those who are hungry can appreciate the heavenly bread and holy wine set before them. Only those who are empty can know the joy of receiving, of having their hands and bodies filled. Fasting helps us hunger for the Body and Blood we will joyfully and gratefully receive.

In a contemporary context, fasting might also sound like silence, a fast from the assault of sound and information with which most of us live. We might fast from newspapers to sharpen our hunger for Good News. We might fast from radio and television broadcasts to sharpen our hunger for the sound of a brother or sister proclaiming, not, just words to sell and titillate, but The Word, living words in the midst of the assembly. We might fast from CD's and iPods to sharpen our hunger for the music we will sing—not recorded, but live - together.

We arrive at church with a common intention: To hear our stories, to sing our songs, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, broken for us, poured out for us, given for us. We see one another and greet one another. We hear of a job lost, a job found. We ask after the ill and the homebound. We rejoice in a new baby or a child returned from college or military service. In every word and gesture, from the time we awake, we are being knit into a community. We are the community who comes to be fed from Christ' own flesh that we might go out and be Christ for the world.

Insert 2 The Gathering Rite: We are here, and not just in the sense of having arrived at our destination. We are here, fully engaged, as a body, as a community.

Insert 3 The Liturgy of the Word: We reverence not only the Word, but the book—the binding and the pages—which carries the Word into our midst.

Insert 4 The Liturgy of the Eucharist: We bring all of human life to the table of the Lord, and God welcomes it—and us—there.

Insert 5 Communion: What American woman leaves home without her purse, and what American man without his wallet? “My life is in there,” someone might say, by which she means cash and credit cards and proofs of identity. But a purse is a hindrance in the communion procession. Nothing on the altar table is for sale, and one's true identity, one's life—“The Body of Christ; the Blood of Christ”—is *there*, on the altar table, and not on a laminated card issued by the state.

Insert 6 Go in Peace: We are dismissed, not to leave the Mass behind, but to carry the Mass with us, in us, as we do the corporal and spiritual works of mercy:

