

Start Dressing and Behaving Better, Says American Bishop

There is a disturbing trend of irreverence in the way people dress and behave at Mass these days, especially during the summer months. So says Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, who, in an impressive rant on his archdiocese's website earlier this month, vented about *“a recurring problem in some of the church these days — an habitual lack of reverence for the sacred mysteries taking place in our midst, especially when the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is being offered.”*

His Excellency stated bluntly, *“The sloppy and even offensive way people dress while attending Mass is something I’ve witnessed personally and regularly receive complaints about.”* He lamented, *“These displays reveal a gross misunderstanding of the sacred space we’ve entered in the church and the truly sacred drama taking place in our midst. You know what I’m talking about,”* he insisted; *“You’ve seen it too.”*

Thus begins a frightening specific litany of examples of exactly what he's talking about:

The endless and boisterous chatter before Mass when people should be more appropriately preparing for the sacred encounter about to unfold. Checking their iPhones and annoying everyone within earshot or eyesight. All sorts of inappropriate and immodest dress spreading out in the pews; wearing wrinkled attire, shorts and garish, unbuttoned shirts; transparent clothing, halter tops, tank tops, and backless, shoulder-less and low cut dresses revealing a woman's cleavage; skimpy clothes that reveal way too much, slogging up the aisle accompanied by the flap-flap-flap of their flip-flops; hyperactive gun-chewing kids and adults with messy hair, chatting and joking with others in line on the way to communion and disrespectfully receiving our Lord in Holy Communion with dirty hands.

“C’mon,” he affirms, “even in the summer, a church is a church, not a beach or pool deck.”

Bishop Tobin longs to see a return to reverence at church, most especially in the people involved in the liturgy. ***“Every member of the worshipping community should dress appropriately for Mass,”*** urged the Bishop, ***“but the obligation is even greater for those who fulfill public ministries during the liturgy — ushers, lectors, servers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.”*** He believes ***“it’s important that they give good example to others in the way they dress, speak, and present themselves during Mass.”*** But Bishop Tobin was just getting started.

“And what about the trend I’ve seen increasingly in recent years, even in our cathedral, of people coming to Mass carrying their water bottles and coffee mugs? Do they really need to be hydrated or caffeinated during that hour they’re in church? Is it a sacred place or an airport terminal? And I wonder how many people even think about the Eucharistic fast of one hour before receiving Holy Communion when they prepare for Mass? I’m old enough to remember when you couldn’t have any food or beverage, except water, from midnight before receiving Holy Communion. It was a sacrifice, to be sure, but also a clear reminder of how special it was to receive Holy Communion.”

Bishop Tobin wasn’t done though.

“And while I’m venting, I still find it inappropriate and disrespectful to have a church full of people talking and creating a disturbing boisterous atmosphere before Mass, completely ignorant of the Lord who is present in the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle and the spiritual needs of their fellow parishioners who wish to spend a few moments of quiet prayer with the Lord as they prepare themselves for Mass. At all times, even when we are not preparing for Mass, the Church should always provide a sanctuary of quiet, peace and prayer for anyone who wants to escape the barrage of noise and technological intrusions of our daily routine and enter into the presence of the Living God.”

“No moment reveals our attitude of respect more,” according to Bishop Tobin, “than during the actual reception of Holy Communion.” The Rhode Island Bishop admits, “I am frequently amazed, however, over how many of the faithful, young and old, who simply don’t know how to respectfully receive Holy Communion properly. This ignorance reached its pinnacle a couple of years ago when one lady, a Confirmation sponsor in fact, dropped the sacred host I had placed in her hand and then looked at me, giggling, saying ‘I guess I’ll need another one of those,’ like she had just lost her favourite snack cracker.”

The Bishop offers a beginner’ lesson on how to receive Holy Communion.

“I’m not one who has a strong preference for receiving Holy Communion standing or kneeling — both are approved by the Church and both can be either reverent or irreverent depending on the disposition of the person. Nor am I one who will fight over the merits of receiving Holy Communion in the hand or on the tongue. Again, both are approved by the Church and can be either reverent or irreverent.”

“Its easy folks, really,” said the Bishop. “As you approach the minister of Holy Communion, out of respect that is due our Lord, you are required to make some sign of reverence towards Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament before receiving Holy Communion. Reverently kneeling to receive Holy Communion fulfills that requirement, however, if you choose to remain standing to receive Holy Communion, you should bow reverently to Jesus (the Sacred Host) before receiving Communion. Then, when you hear the words, ‘The Body of Christ,’ you simple respond ‘Amen’ as you carefully extend both hands (open wide and flat), or put out you tongue. And note, you are required to consume the sacred host then and there and not take it with you down the aisle or back to your pew. Realizing the sacred encounter you have just had with the Lord, it is always important to take an appropriate amount of time for quiet, and thanksgiving prayer, rather that rushing out of church immediately after receiving Holy Communion, before Mass is over.”

The following admonition recently appeared in a Florida parish Sunday bulletin, and is always appropriate, when we realize the special, sacred encounter to which we are invited to participate and experience with the Lord when we come to church to celebrate Mass, especially now as we enter the warmer, more casual days of summer:

*“Please come to Mass
early enough not to disrupt,
dressed proudly enough not to offend,
worship reverently enough not to distract,
and leave late enough not to insult.”*

(The celebration is not over until the closing,
recessional hymn has been concluded.)