

## **Did You Know?**

### **Discover the Meaning behind our Catholic Traditions**

#### **1. Why does the priest kiss the altar at Mass?**

The altar is a powerful symbol of Christ Himself—the cornerstone and the place of sacrifice. At its consecration, it is anointed with sacred chrism and often contains relics of saints, linking our worship to the witness of those who gave their lives for Christ. When the priest kisses the altar at the beginning and end of Mass, it is a gesture of reverence, love, and unity with Christ and His Church. This act also echoes the ancient Christian practice of celebrating the Eucharist over the tombs of martyrs, as described by Saint Ambrose. The Catechism teaches that the altar represents both the table of the Lord and the sacrifice of the Cross (CCC 1182, 1383).

#### **2. Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest?**

The Sacrament of Reconciliation flows directly from Christ's own words to His apostles: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them" (John 20:22–23). In confession, the priest acts *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ—offering not his own forgiveness, but God's mercy. Sin harms not only our relationship with God but also our communion with the Church; therefore, reconciliation is both personal and communal. The Catechism emphasizes that only God forgives sins, yet He has entrusted this ministry to the apostles and their successors (CCC 1441–1442). Saint Augustine beautifully expressed this truth, teaching that Christ continues His work of forgiveness through His ministers on earth.

#### **3. Why is incense used at Mass?**

Incense has deep biblical roots and rich symbolism. In Scripture, it represents prayer rising to God: "The smoke of the incense...rose before God" (Revelation 8:3–4). At Mass, incense is used to honor what is sacred—the altar, the Gospel, the priest, and the people of God. Its fragrance signifies holiness, reverence, and the presence of God. The use of incense also engages our senses, reminding us that worship involves our whole being—body and soul. The Catechism notes that visible signs like incense help express invisible spiritual realities (CCC 1154).

#### **4. Why is holy water placed at church entrances?**

Holy water reminds us of our Baptism, the sacrament through which we were cleansed of sin and made members of the Church. When we bless ourselves with holy water upon entering the church, we renew our baptismal promises and prepare our hearts for worship. It is both a sign of purification and a reminder of our identity as children of God. The Catechism explains that sacramentals like holy water prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it (CCC 1668). Early Christian writers such as Tertullian referred to the use of blessed water as a sign of spiritual renewal and protection.

## **5. Why does the priest wear different colored vestments?**

Liturgical colors reflect the seasons and mysteries of the Church's year, helping us enter more deeply into the life of Christ. Purple signifies penance and preparation (Advent and Lent), white expresses joy and victory (Christmas, Easter, and feasts of saints who were not martyrs), red represents the Holy Spirit and the blood of martyrs, and green symbolizes hope and growth during Ordinary Time. These colors are not merely decorative—they are visual signs that teach and express the meaning of the liturgy. The Catechism highlights that such signs and symbols instruct the faithful and deepen participation in worship (CCC 1145–1146).

## **6. Why do Catholics genuflect before entering a pew?**

Genuflection—bending one knee to the ground—is a profound gesture of adoration reserved for Christ present in the Eucharist. When Catholics enter a church and see the tabernacle, they genuflect to acknowledge that Jesus is truly present—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. This act is not simply custom; it is a physical expression of faith and humility before the Lord. The Catechism affirms the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and calls for gestures of reverence that reflect this truth (CCC 1374).

## **7. Why are bells rung during the consecration?**

The ringing of bells at the consecration draws our attention to the most sacred moment of the Mass—the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. In earlier times, when the priest prayed quietly in Latin, bells helped alert the faithful to this pivotal moment. Even today, they serve as a joyful proclamation and invitation to adore Christ present on the altar. The Catechism calls the Eucharist “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC 1324), and the bells highlight this mystery.

## **8. Why is Sunday a holy day of obligation?**

Sunday is the “Lord’s Day,” commemorating Christ’s Resurrection and the new creation it brings. From the earliest days of Christianity, believers gathered on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. Saint Justin Martyr described this practice in the 2nd century, showing how central Sunday worship has always been. The Catechism teaches that Sunday is the foundation and core of the liturgical year and a day set apart for worship, rest, and renewal (CCC 2177–2181). Participating in Mass on Sunday is not just a rule—it is a vital expression of our relationship with God and the community.

## **9. Why are candles used at Mass?**

Candles symbolize Christ as the Light of the World, who dispels the darkness of sin and death. Their flame represents both divine presence and the call for us to be light to others. Candles also create an atmosphere of reverence and solemnity, marking the sacredness of the liturgy. The Catechism explains that candles, like other liturgical signs, point beyond themselves to spiritual realities (CCC 1189).

## **10. Why do Catholics make the Sign of the Cross?**

The Sign of the Cross is a simple yet profound profession of faith. By tracing the cross over our bodies and invoking the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we recall our Baptism and affirm our belief in the Trinity. It reminds us that our salvation comes through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and marks us as belonging to Him. The Catechism teaches that this gesture sanctifies our actions and helps us begin and end prayer in God's name (CCC 2157). Saint Cyril of Jerusalem encouraged Christians to make this sign frequently as a shield of faith.

## **11. Why is the Gospel given special honor at Mass?**

The Gospel holds a place of special dignity because it contains the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. During the proclamation, we stand, sing, and often trace small crosses on our forehead, lips, and heart—asking that God's Word be in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts. Christ is truly present in His Word proclaimed in the liturgy. The Catechism emphasizes that when Scripture is read in the Church, God Himself speaks to His people (CCC 1088, 1349).

## **12. Why is a red lamp kept near the tabernacle?**

The sanctuary lamp burns continuously to indicate the presence of Christ in the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle. Its steady flame is a silent witness to the Lord dwelling among His people and serves as a call to prayer and reverence. The Catechism teaches that Christ remains present in the Blessed Sacrament, inviting us to adore Him even outside of Mass (CCC 1379).