

The Mass in Slow Motion

Volume – 4

The Celebrant Goes to the Chair

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

After reverencing the altar the celebrant goes to the chair. Now perhaps a word or two on the chair is called for. Someone may wonder why the priest has a chair of some prominence. Why does he not simply sit among the faithful and come forward as necessary? Here again, there is a history.

In the ancient world, the chair was a symbol of authority and office. We still have something of this today in the concept of the “Judge’s Bench.”

The chair was also a symbol in the ancient world of teaching authority. It is our usual experience in the modern world that teachers stand when they teach or give lectures. But in the ancient world teachers sat as they taught. Now they didn’t just sit in some casual way with their legs crossed and sipping coffee. Rather, they were seated formally and in a prominent place in the room.

You may remember that Scriptures usually record that when Jesus taught, he would sit. For example, we read in Matthew’s gospel that as Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount: *He went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, His disciples came to him. He began to teach them* (Mat 5:1, 2). Another example of this is when he was giving the sermon in Nazareth. He had stood to read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah and then, upon finishing it: *He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4:20-21) There are other examples of Jesus being seated to teach in Mark 13:3; John 8:2; and dozens of other places.

Many people find this fact surprising since they always imagine Jesus standing to preach but, it is almost never the case. He, like every ancient Rabbi and teacher sat to teach. So, the Chair has an ancient history of governance and teaching authority.





Now the Bishop's Chair is especially imbued with this meaning. In every Cathedral the Bishop's Chair is given great prominence. In fact, the word Cathedral, comes from the Latin word "cathedra" meaning "chair." Hence, the Cathedral is the "Church of the Chair." The photo at the left is of Cardinal Wuerl's cathedra in St. Matthew's Cathedral. It is the symbol of his governance and teaching authority in this Archdiocese.

It is interesting to note that a bishop is given the special privilege to sit in the sanctuary to preach. Most of them do not use this option, except at very formal times like ordinations.

As a general rule, priests are expected to stand today at the pulpit (or ambo) when they preach. Despite this, the priest's chair continues to carry these ancient meanings already mentioned.

There is also a more modern significance given to chair in the General Instructions of the Roman Missal: The Chair of the Priest must signify his office of presiding over the gathering and of directing the prayer. Any appearance of a throne, however, is to be avoided. (G.I.R.M # 310). Thus, the Chair of the Priest also indicates a role of presiding over the Liturgical Assembly. In this sense the chair represents his roles of teaching, governing and sanctifying, under the authority of the local bishop.

In the end though, all three of these roles (governing, teaching and presiding) actually refer to Christ. The priest, through his reception of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, is configured (joined) to Christ and acts in persona Christi (in the person of Christ). Thus, the prominence of his chair is really a way to honor Christ, who is the true High Priest of every liturgy. The priest's chair is Jesus' chair. It is ultimately He who governs, teaches, sanctifies, and presides over us and He ministers through his priest. Pray for the grace to see beyond "Father Pope" and to see Jesus presiding over and ministering to you.

In this sense the chair of the priest should have a very special place in your mind and a prominent place in our sanctuary. Surely, the tabernacle and altar should be in the central axis but also prominent should be the Chair of the Priest, the Chair of Christ.