

# Ritual and worship: signs, symbols and realities in the liturgy

## Adam Coates

Many readers will, a few months ago, have experienced an event that numerous proud parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncle go through – that of seeing their beloved child, grandchild, or niece or nephew graduate from university.

They will have stepped, momentarily, into the sometimes baffling and esoteric world of academia. Heads may have been ‘capped’, hoods draped over shoulders, strange gowns will have been worn by the graduates and academic staff, the *Gaudeamus Igitur* may have even been sung.

Overall, it makes for an enjoyable occasion as the graduands join the ranks of graduates, and their years of toil and labour are recognised and rewarded appropriately.

When viewed from the outside, these events may seem curious to behold. Why is someone touched on the head with an old hat? Why is a hood draped over your shoulders? We realise, within the confines of the graduation, that this is representative of something else; the signs and symbols of the ceremony mark an event and a change. Fundamentally, these things speak of something beyond that which they simply are. The old hat being tapped upon someone’s head marks the conferral of a degree, the odd gown represents the membership of the academic community.

There is here, a certain parallel with the liturgy of the Church. In the liturgy, the Second Vatican Council says, ‘the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ’. Why does the Church worship? Fundamentally, the Church worships because worship is what is owed to God. To use the language of the 20th century philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, the Church makes a “value response” to the supreme Value that is God. Unlike something which is merely subjectively satisfying, the realm of the objective is not something we bend to our will, but something which bends us to it. As God is supreme, we use the methods and ways He gives us to glorify Him. This is not something God needs, and it adds nothing to His being; it is, rather, the proper response of mankind to God.

Why, though, is Catholic worship



Left, the Old Chapel Museum contains a stunning collection of chasubles worn by Catholic clergy through the ages

Photo by permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, copyright Stonyhurst College Collections

knees, as well as being an appropriate value response, also has a pedagogical element in that we are made small before He who is mighty. Similarly, a stained-glass window, showing a saint and some item related to them, or a scene from the life of Our Lord or Our Lady, is a far more powerful devotional and catechetical tool than merely reading about the fact. As St Thomas Aquinas says, it is “befitting to man ... that he should employ sensible signs to signify anything, because he derives his knowledge from sensibles”.

St Thomas continues and relates this to the idea of worship in the form of sacrifice.

A continuous theme of the religious education curriculum for Catholic school children in England and Wales is an explanation and examination of the signs of symbols found within Catholic churches and in the liturgy. It is hoped that we at the Christian Heritage Centre, making liberal use of the Stonyhurst College Collections and the sumptuous neo-gothic St Peter’s church, will be able to assist in this mission. St Peter’s is rich and colour and light and makes an ideal place for children to learn about Christian symbolism. The Stonyhurst College Collections speak for themselves. As the oldest museum in the English-speaking world, it holds in trust a repository of sacred objects beyond compare. The chasubles worn and seen by our illustrious predecessors (pictured) are not simply museum pieces, but something that even today speaks of the beauty and grandeur of God experienced in the liturgy. Their beauty is communicative of Him who is beauty itself. It is hoped that visiting school groups of all ages will be able to see a little piece of this reality when they visit the Christian Heritage Centre on school visits.

These objects, signs and symbols are all part of a reality stretching across time as the Church and its servants throughout the ages tried ever anew to communicate the greatness of the Almighty and the reality of the liturgical acts taking place. Thus the human person, this union of body and soul, is enriched by the Church’s liturgy in making this proper value response to God. They are educated and nourished by the use of sensible things, communicating in the most authentic manner possible the truth of spiritual realities.

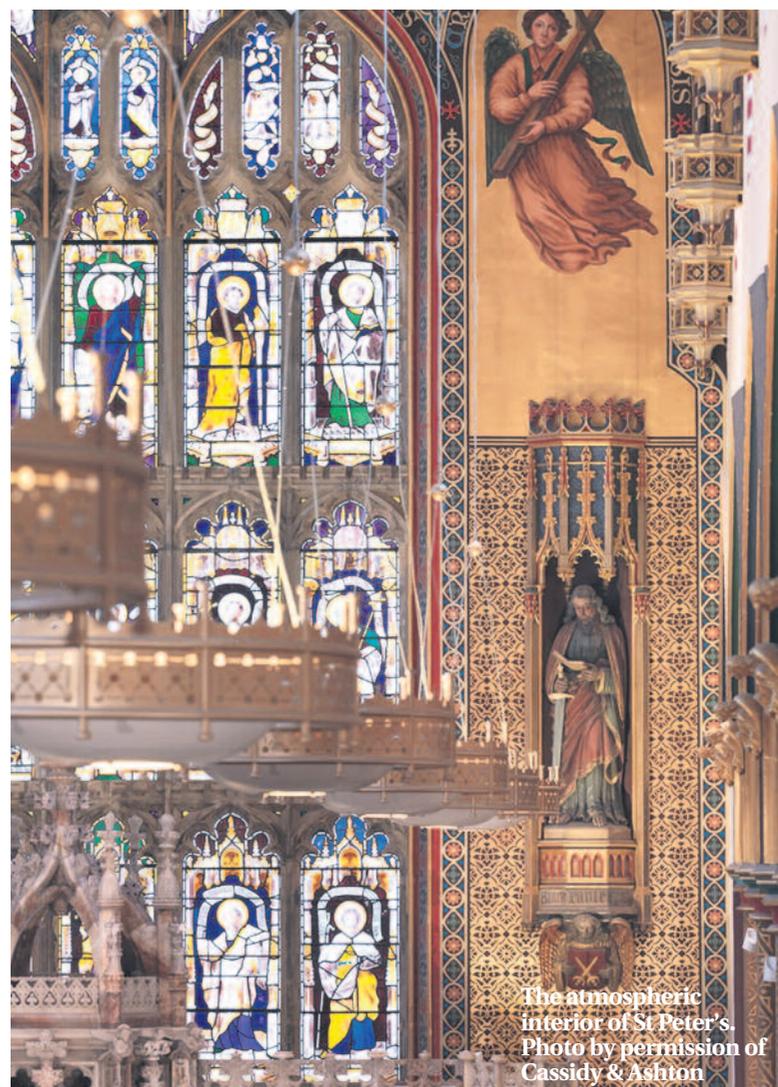
Adam Coates is an educational assistant at the CHC

filled with signs and symbols? Why does the priest genuflect? Why do people fall to their knees in adoration? Why are a series of vestments worn? Why does the priest make various gestures with his hands? To provide a general answer to these questions, it is necessary to go back to the question of what is the human person. A person, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, is a “unity of soul and body”. The body is not merely some vehicle for our souls to get around in, but is an essential part of what it is to be human. With regard to how we come to know things, St Thomas Aquinas asserts, drawing upon the Greek philosopher Aristotle, that nothing can exist in our minds without our first having sensed it. That is, our way of knowing anything depends on us having sensed it, at least in an elemental fashion, in some way. Even if one were to imagine something fanciful, like pink elephants with yellow polka dots, I am only able to imagine such a bizarre creature because I know what an elephant looks like, because I know what the colours pink and yellow are, and because I know what polka dots are. My imagi-

nation depends upon the abstract sense data to create the fictional.

What does this have to do with worship? Exactly because we cannot know anything without having sensed it in some way, the Church

makes liberal use in its official worship of that which engages the senses. What communicates that God is glorious: simply stating the fact, or saying it and falling to our knees in adoration? Falling to our



The atmospheric interior of St Peter’s. Photo by permission of Cassidy & Ashton

## Supporting Theodore House

How to support The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst  
The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst is a registered charity, established to increase access by the Catholic community to the Stonyhurst Collections. Images from the Collections are kindly reproduced by permission of the Society of Jesus and Stonyhurst College.

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst has built Theodore House to enable visitors, scholars, parishes, schools and retreatants to deepen their Christian faith.

Further details of how to support the project or to book Theodore House are available from 01254 827329.