



## Etiquette

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At the same time, Shafer said, she feels that extremely disruptive behavior, especially during Mass, should be discouraged. But when is that line crossed? Coming up with a blanket document for church etiquette is a difficult and perhaps impossible task, according to liturgy specialists Joan Workmaster and Father James Moroney.

"There's never been anything (officially) written. I just think there's an unspoken assumption that there's certain norms of behavior you would follow," said Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy. "Any time human beings come in contact with each other and invade one another's space, there are unwritten rules."

"The great variation between Catholic communities is encouraged. Therefore, the micro-managing of liturgical etiquette is not a big concern," said Father Moroney, executive director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for the Liturgy.

At the same time, Father Moroney acknowledged that poor manners in church can easily distract other worshippers.

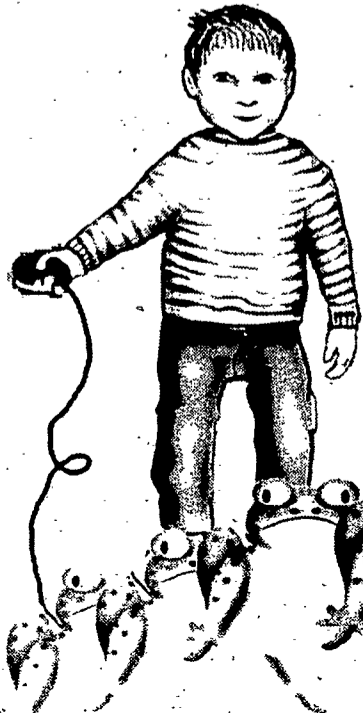
"Did you ever notice that the things that drive us crazy the most are the little things?" Father Moroney remarked.

But Father Peter M.J. Stravinskis considers these "little things" at Mass to be a big issue.

"This is where the average person experiences church the most profoundly. Very simply, we need to have respect for ourselves and other people when we're in the presence of the body of Christ," said Father Stravinskis, editor of *The Catholic Answer*, a bimonthly national publication in which he addresses write-in questions about the Catholic Church and its teachings.

### Common courtesy

Based on what he observes from the pulpit, Father David Gramkee asserted that proper respect in church is frequently lacking.



"I don't know if people can realize what I see," remarked Father Gramkee, pastor at St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls.

Some of the more bothersome acts, he said, include the reading of the Sunday bulletin during Mass. And the filling out of collection envelopes during his homily.

"One lady would always write out her check as soon as I started to preach," he said.

Father George Wiant said he's seen an unpleasant reaction from some parishioners when they're implored to take part in the music.

"Everybody's supposed to sing, but people put a face on like, 'Well, you just make me!'" said Father Wiant, pastor at St. Patrick's Church in Victor.

Father Wiant also noted that young children will occasionally leave a trail of litter behind after Mass — and the parents don't clean it up.

"The food of choice is Cheerios," Father Wiant reported.

The Victor pastor did emphasize that he's sympathetic to families with small children. He has less sympathy, however, for adults who don't put prayer books back in place after Mass.

"Why do people leave them scattered all over?" Father Wiant wondered.

Meanwhile, Father Gramkee takes issue with people who wander into Mass late and/or leave right after Communion.

"I'm wondering that in our minimalist society, if people are saying, 'That's all I have to do,'" Father Gramkee said. "(But) you don't go to somebody else's house for dinner and then leave before it's over. That's just common courtesy."

For those who do arrive on time and stay to the end — but chat up a storm before and after — Father Stravinskis was blunt in his response to a *Catholic Answer* question about talking in church:

"The time before Mass should be dedicated to preparing oneself to enter into the mystery, while the time immediately following should be for thanksgiving. I see nothing wrong with greeting the person occupying the seat next to you upon entering the pew, but a smile or quiet 'hello' should suffice," Father Stravinskis wrote. "Socializing is inappropriate in the body of the church; that is for the vestibule and parish hall."

Father Stravinskis also chides people who are underdressed for Mass. For example, he said, somebody who comes to a Saturday evening liturgy straight from playing in a sporting event — unshowered and still in uniform — should simply go to Mass on Sunday morning instead.

"A lot of this depends on common sense," Father Stravinskis remarked.

### How not to offend

Father John Philipps told the *Catholic Courier* that his parish is "quite good" as a whole on etiquette, but there are times he feels the need to serve a gentle reminder.

"You don't like to be scolding people from the pulpit all the time," said Father Philipps, pastor at St. Bridget/St. Joseph Church in East Bloomfield.

Instead, Father Philipps expressed his feelings in his June 28 bulletin column. The humorous text was based on a parishioner's complaint that an altar boy was chewing gum during Mass. However, Father Philipps pointed out that poor church etiquette extends to all ages.

"At the same Mass when the young server was jawing a wad of Wrigleys," Father Philipps wrote, "a number of adults strolled in long after the Mass had begun. Maybe they had a good reason. Car wouldn't start. Couldn't find their envelope."

rang just as they were going out the door. Or maybe not so good a reason.

... Other adults left early. There must have been a good reason.

Diarrhea? Or maybe they suddenly remembered they left the oven on. Or perhaps they just didn't feel that the remainder of the Mass ... was important enough to hang around another 10 minutes for."

Father Wiant said he liked

Father Philipps' article about the gum-chewing altar boy so much, he had it reprinted

in his own parish bulletin. Father Wiant himself has devoted an entire weekend homily in the past to church etiquette and titled it "Manners Sunday."

Father Gramkee is another pastor who conveys his reminders in print. In the parish's June 28 bulletin, he published a pointed statement about people who leave church right after Communion.

"I don't want to judge the motives of those who leave Mass early. At the same time I cannot see how one hour out of 168 hours in the week is too much for us to give back to God," Father Gramkee wrote.

Despite these pastors' efforts, Ryan feels that more priests should be vocal about church etiquette.

"I think it's a priest's duty to say, 'You're in God's house and this is how you should behave,'" Ryan said. "It really should be said from the pulpit, but the priests don't want to hurt feelings."

Father Stravinskis said that priests should indeed risk incurring the perpetrators' wrath.

"Are some people going to be alienated? Of course. Jesus Christ alienated people and he was crucified for it," Father Stravinskis remarked.

Father Stravinskis charged that priests who create a "carnival atmosphere" by walking down the aisles and greeting people before Mass ("Hey Tom, how 'ya doing, Hey Mary"), or encouraging laughter and applause during Mass, set the tone for bad etiquette.

"If that's what the people expect, then what are they to do?" Father Stravinskis said.

On the other hand, Shafer greatly prefers this feel-good atmosphere to the tone set by a priest she remembers from childhood. She recalled that he would call misbehaving children out of the pews and make them kneel in the aisle.

"If you embarrass people in front of the whole congregation, why would they come back?" Shafer commented.

### Drawing boundaries

At what point is behavior at Mass bothersome enough that action should be taken? A good gauge, Workmaster suggested, might be to see if people around you are equally uncomfortable.

"When this becomes disturbing to not just me personally, but to a large segment, that's when you have to go to the pastor and staff," she said.

Father Gramkee said that if somebody's behavior is "very disturbing, I will go to the individual." But he also said that some parishioners become overzealous in pointing out this deviant activity. His usual response, he said, is: "I didn't realize you were part of the liturgy police."

At the same time, Workmaster said that not every kind of behavior can easily be corrected. She wondered, for example, how to approach a person who recites prayers and sings in a very loud voice.

"What do you say? In these kinds of situations, it's very difficult to say 'Tone it down.' I don't think there's a nice way of



Neither, Workmaster added, should people who are developmentally disabled — and prone to spontaneous shouting — be told that they don't belong at Mass.

"They become accepted because they are part of that community, and that's something about becoming the body of Christ. We accept people as they are," Workmaster said.

Perhaps, Shafer suggested, it would help simply not to worry about what other people in church are doing.

"Are we looking for it? Is it becoming a spectator sport? Are we watching for the things which will thus support our argument? Because we will surely find it," Shafer said.

In the end, Father Philipps emphasized, it's important not to push people away who haven't observed every step of church protocol.

"You have to live in the real world on some of these things. We're happy to see them there — in the back pew, or late, or chewing gum," Father Philipps said.

Shafer noted that Jesus didn't set such strict standards. She quoted Luke 19:1-10, in which Jesus stayed at the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector without passing judgment on him.

"He didn't say, 'When you get things right, then I'll come to your house,'" Shafer said.

Father Stravinskis feels otherwise, saying that priests and congregations are wrong in relaxing their standards.

"The whole idea that we'll take anyone, no matter how they look or act, is ridiculous," Father Stravinskis said.

### Changing times

Father Wiant noted that much of this tension has resulted from the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the church as community. Although he said this philosophy may have created some loosening of church etiquette standards, Father Wiant supports the atmosphere that Vatican II sought to promote.

"People are feeling that their churches are more than sanctuaries. They're also meeting places," he said.

"The misconception we can have is that reverence has to be stiff," Workmaster added. "But it can be shown in so many other ways."

Workmaster said that neither quiet reverence nor joyful noise is necessarily a wrong approach to public worship.

"Most people are balancing their own need for private prayer time with their understanding of the church's call to public worship," Workmaster said.

Ryan said she struggles to find the middle ground because she grew up in an era where quiet reverence was the norm at church.

"I think we've lost a lot. With something that was so good for so long, how could it now be bad?" Ryan remarked.

On the other hand, Father Wiant said we're not going to return to those times, so there's little use in fighting it.

"Nothing is going to help you unless you go back to 40 years ago. And I don't want to go back there. I know what it's like, and that's why we made the