

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Servers

When I was twelve years old, I found myself standing in the back of St. Patrick's Church in Rockville, Maryland, one Sunday morning with about twenty other boys. We were all dressed in a plain black cassock and white surplice, lined up along the back wall, like little soldiers, our hands folded prayerfully, preparing for our installation as altar boys.

Moments before Mass began, my parents arrived. My father caught sight of me and strolled up and down the row of boys, inspecting our hands. "Nails clean?" he asked the kid next to me. My dad gave me a look and a smirk and then moved on down the row. I was mortified. The boy beside me turned to me, dumbfounded.

"Who was THAT weirdo?," he asked. I shook my head and shrugged. "I don't know," I lied. "Never saw him before." I wanted to crawl in a hole.

Thus began my short but colorful career as an altar boy. (It was 1971. The concept of altar *girls* in those days was unheard of.) For the next couple years, I served two or three times a month at St. Patrick's, growing accustomed to the hard marble floor of the sanctuary and experiencing the quiet exhilaration of being Up There, by the altar, a few feet from the tabernacle and the consecration and the overwhelming air of holiness that came with incense and candle wax and bells.

I don't remember all that much of my years as a server—hormones were colliding in my brain, and my infatuation with holiness soon gave way to other pursuits—but I did bring away from it one valuable tip. If you ever get wax on cloth, put a paper bag over the spot, and apply a hot iron. It melts the wax and it sticks to the bag and the stain is lifted.

This tip came in handy a few years later in high school, at a party that involved candles in somebody's basement. The result was wax on a shag carpet, which I

was able to help a teenage girl remove with an iron and a bag—thus saving her from her parents' wrath and earning her undying gratitude. (The girl was Rosemary and her father had a newfangled job at the parish, where he worked as something called a deacon. But I digress.)

All these memories and more came flooding back to me over the celebration of Easter, when our own altar servers (there are girls now!) turned out in vast numbers and were, in a word, astounding. We have about ninety of them, of all shapes and ages and sizes, and their commitment and enthusiasm are an inspiration. It helps that David James and Fr. Pas-senant together run a pretty tight ship. (Actually, it is more than a ship. It is an armada. Planning some liturgies involves preparation and rehearsal that rivals the invasion of Normandy.)

How these kids find their way around the altar, with torches and incense and God-knows-what-else, is a mystery. But they do it. And the result is simply beautiful—reverent, prayerful, and at times, downright holy. (I should mention that they turned out in droves during Lent, to serve the Stations of the Cross—and on a Friday night, no less.)

And their devotion bears fruit. Many of the servers remain active in other ministries in the parish, long after they finish serving at the altar.

All I can add is my own humble gratitude. So: thank you, every one of you, for adding so much to the liturgies. Thank you for enhancing the experience of prayer at the parish. Thank you, in fact, for making your own hard work and dedication into a kind of prayer.

And, of course: thanks for the memories.

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