

Learn Your Faith...A Weekly Educational Column

Veiling Statues in Lent

It has been the custom of the Roman Church from the 17th Century to the present to veil crosses, statues, and images of the saints (except the Stations of the Cross) from the 5th Sunday of Lent until Easter. The crosses are unveiled after the unveiling of the cross during the Good Friday liturgy, while the other images are uncovered after the Gloria of the Easter Vigil.

While the historical roots of the custom seem uncertain, we may consider three interpretations of the practice. First, consider a mystical interpretation from 19th Century liturgical scholar Dom Gueranger. To prepare Himself for the events of His Passion, the Lord hid Himself from the rage of the Jewish authorities. So now, He is “hidden” from the world as we prepare to commemorate these mysteries.

This interpretation is derived from the gospel passage traditionally read on the 5th Sunday of Lent, specifically John 8:46-59. At this point in His relationship with the Jewish authorities our Lord has revealed His divinity to them, concluding His explanation with the words “...I AM”. At this, “...they took up stones to throw at Him; but **Jesus hid Himself** and went out of the temple”.

A spiritual interpretation of the custom is also possible according to Gueranger. We usually think of the cross as a symbol of Christ’s victory over sin and death. But at this stage in His life, and for those who followed Him, the cross is a sign of humiliation; the worst imaginable death for the worst imaginable crimes (blasphemy). In this sense we try to shield our Lord from this humiliation, or to hide it even from ourselves. In His Passion, the Lord’s divinity was obscured by this humiliation, and his humanity was obscured by the disfiguring wounds of the Passion.

Third, a psychological explanation: veiling the cross and statues actually draws more attention to them than does leaving them unveiled. The bride at her wedding wears a veil. What sense does this make if everyone already knows what she looks like? The point of the veil is not to hide her from us, but to draw our attention to her. The mystery intrigues and attracts us. The liturgy itself is presented to us as a series of veils. The priest is veiled in his vestments; the altar is veiled by a cloth; the chalice is covered with a veil until it is to be used; the tabernacle veils the Blessed Sacrament from our sight. Incense veils the entire sanctuary. The most impressive veil is that which the Lord Himself uses to present Himself to us, and hide Himself from us: The accidents of bread and wine are veils which hide the mystery of the substantial presence of the Lord in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

It is clear that these veils make it possible for us to “see” the God whom we cannot see. When all these veils are eliminated from the liturgy we risk creating an atmosphere in which there is nothing to see, nothing to intrigue us, and nothing to attract us.

Consider, finally, that the apostles “looked at” the Lord’s divinity everyday for three years, but could not “see” it until He “showed” it to them by means of signs and symbols at His Transfiguration

(cf MT 17:1-8).