

Courting Reverence: Why Has the Courtroom Retained the Reverence the Mass Has Lost?

By Rev. Paul D. Scalia

You may not have recognized Sean Combs or Marshall Bruce Mathers III as they appeared for their court dates. The irony is, their fans would not have recognized them either. Mr. Combs—aka Puffy or Puff Daddy—and Mr. Mathers—aka Eminem or Slim Shady—are giants in the world of rap music. They both have enormously successful careers carefully established on a “bad boy” rebel image. In fact, Mr. Combs is CEO of Bad Boy Entertainment.

But for court they departed from their regular image and behavior. Gone were the baseball caps, sunglasses, gold chains, leather jackets, T-shirts, and baggy jeans so familiar in the rap music crowd. Each of them wore a nice new suit and a sharp tie. They did not have the defiant, violent, in-your-face attitude that their music carries and that they display on stage. Rather, they sat still and respectfully in the courtroom—as everyone else does. As far as I know, courtrooms do not have a dress code. But everyone senses the seriousness of the business conducted there. They dress and act accordingly. The dramatic distinction between courtroom behavior and regular behavior calls to mind the distinction that should—but does not—exist between the sacred and profane in Catholic churches.

In many ways the courtroom resembles a church, or at least what a church should be. Its benches look like pews. The man who presides is robed—in black. He renders judgment from a sort of sanctuary: from a large table, usually elevated, set apart many times by what looks like an altar rail. The bailiff functions as his acolyte and the jury could be his choir. Proper reverence must be maintained in the courtroom: when the judge enters, the people stand; to speak with him, you must ask to approach the bench. People always dress respectfully for the courtroom and, if they must speak, they do so in hushed voices.

Alas, despite these similarities, the courtroom clearly receives more respect and reverence than a church. It certainly elicits a distinction from our dress-casual culture that a church no longer does. The sanctuary of a church is no longer set apart: people do not think twice about approaching it and even walking through it if they want. The altar in many cases is not elevated, not distinguished from the congregation in any real sense. People do not dress respectfully for church. And when was the last time they merely whispered?

The fact that the courtroom has maintained a distinction between the casual and serious—the sacred and profane, in effect—while the Mass has not, indicates that current irreverence for the Mass is not just a product of larger cultural decay. The courtroom shows that we can still maintain reverence in our culture. The way people respond to the Mass indicates something drastically wrong with the way Mass is celebrated and the way our churches have been redesigned.

Serious Business

The courtroom is a place of serious business: it is where life and death issues are decided, where a man's future hangs in the balance, where fortunes are won or lost, debts are settled, and guilt is bound or loosed. Even though the "proceedings" of church conduct a "business" infinitely more important than any courtroom's, people have no sense of it. They do not realize that the Mass makes present the victory of life over death, and gives us our inheritance as children of God. Granted, unlike court proceedings, the Mass does not determine guilt or innocence but instead celebrates and communicates reconciliation. Further, at Mass we approach God not only as supplicants but also—and even more—as children. Nonetheless, the Mass (and Confession, Eucharistic Adoration, etc.) deals with forgiveness and punishment, with innocence and guilt, with eternal salvation and damnation. That is the most serious business.

Why then does our culture respect and revere the courtroom, while it practically scorns churches? Obviously there are many general causes, most obviously the loss of the sense of sin, which obscures the seriousness of any religious undertaking. But a comparison of the respect for the courtroom with the irreverence for the Mass isolates two specific causes for the latter: the priest-host and the egalitarian architecture.

“Good Morning!”

First of all, no judge would ever lower his courtroom to the level that many priests bring the sacred liturgy. “Good morning!” Would an important trial ever begin with such a trite greeting? Would a judge announce the birthdays or anniversaries of people in the courtroom? Would he ease the tension of the courtroom by beginning with a joke? It would be rare indeed for a judge to act so flippantly during a trial. He has the power to silence people in the courtroom—and even to hold them “in contempt of court.” The judge knows that the tension in the courtroom is healthy because it focuses everyone on the serious business before them. If he dilutes this tension, he lessens the importance of his role, his words, and his courtroom. The judge understands a basic paradox: If the courtroom has the atmosphere of every day life, then it no longer has any relevance for every day life.

The Mass has a similar tension. The formal greetings, the reminders of sin, the call to repentance, the invitations to prayer, etc.—all these create a healthy tension that reminds us of the importance of the liturgy. Unfortunately, many priests see themselves as hosts charged with the task of entertaining and consequently do not see the benefit of this tension. They do not understand that it elicits reverence and respect for the liturgy. As a result, such priests diffuse the tension with casual greetings, jokes, and references to secular celebrations. They intend to relax the congregation and put people at ease. They instead produce a casual, mediocre and often meaningless atmosphere. They do not understand the paradox: If the Mass has the atmosphere of every day life, then it no longer has any relevance for every day life.

Seating is Everything

Second, those who design courtrooms understand the importance of the physical arrangement of the people. Not everyone is on the same level. The gallery is normally distinguished somehow from the lawyers. The jury has its own area, and the judge looks down from what is obviously the most important seat in the house. The use of rails, benches, and tables to distinguish the participants reminds everyone of the hierarchy essential for the business involved. Further, courtrooms rarely, if ever, look cheap. In fact, they normally have dignified furniture of the finest wood and dark colors that bring a solemn tone to the whole place. All the physical furnishings communicate a dignity that no one fails to notice.

For centuries, churches had a similar design. The congregation occupied the nave, while the ministers served in the sanctuary, set apart by an altar rail and elevated by a couple of steps. The layout reflected the hierarchy of the Church that is essential to the liturgy. The furnishings and building materials conveyed a dignity and seriousness.

Now, however, new churches display a more egalitarian architecture, and old churches twist and turn to accommodate the new thinking. The altar commonly is placed on the same level as the congregation and even moved out to be in the midst of the people. Chairs that can be easily moved and rearranged have replaced the pews. Kneelers have been eliminated and the altar rail, of course, has long since been removed. These new designs lack a distinction between the people and the ministers and effectively eliminate any sense of the hierarchical structure of the Church and of the Mass. If a courtroom were designed like this the people would ask, “Who is in charge?” Catholics may ask the same at many Masses.

Moreover, these new and renovated churches tend to look quite cheap. Movable chairs, so important for quickly changing the church into a concert hall, do not convey seriousness, dignity or reverence. Rather, they bear a striking resemblance to kitchen chairs. One theologian calls all this the “domestication of transcendence.” In other words, we feel at home in the church—so why should we regard it as special?

The Mass, and a church in general, should be a refuge of reverence in the midst of a culture that increasingly reveres nothing—a glimpse of heaven as we progress on our pilgrim way. The solution is not to make the Mass into a court hearing or churches into courtrooms. They have more differences than similarities. Nonetheless, the courtroom has not suffered the same trivialization and irreverence inflicted on the Mass. Insofar as these two are similar, then, we should learn what elicits reverence and what we should retain of our tradition. If in doubt, we can always ask Puff Daddy and Slim Shady.

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