



Decoding the Church's ceremonial 'pecking order'

Dear Father Kerper: On Christmas Eve, my family and I viewed the Vigil Mass broadcast from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Pope Francis, whom I greatly admire, was the principal celebrant. My daughter noticed that Pope Francis and the cardinals were close to the altar and elevated. The many religious sisters present at the Mass sat among the laity. My daughter wondered why the pope, who often speaks of equality and the dignity of women, tolerates what seemed to her a rejection of equality.

Your daughter has a keen sense of how seating arrangements may reveal the "pecking order" within institutions, especially the Catholic Church. When contemporary Catholics note the position of people within large liturgies, they believe they're seeing the Church's true "power map." Fair enough. Yes, the Holy Father and cardinals sit in "Big Power Land," whereas the sisters occupy the outskirts of power, spaces far away from the altar. Indeed, some would say that these old customs manifest and even perpetuate inequality and the exclusion of women from Church power.

Perhaps. But we must always remember that the Church, like Christ, is human and divine. As such, the Church has "worldly" and divine aspects. As an institution immersed in the "ways of the world," the Church inevitably imitates the styles and methods of the powerful. For example, the Church has financial managers, development specialists, lobbyists, human resource departments and so on. Its structures very much resemble corporations.



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But the essence of Christian life — the imitation of Christ — is primarily humble service, not power. As the Lord once said: "The Son of Man has come, not to be served, but to serve." At the Last Supper, he went far beyond mere words to a monumental gesture: the washing of feet. Then he explained it: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (Jn 13:14-15)

Your daughter's response to the Holy Father's Christmas Eve Mass expresses a perennial stumbling block for many good people: the Church's ancient ceremonial practices seem to exalt wealth and power while suppressing humility and service. Even Pope Francis understands this predicament and has simplified his own vesture and his residence.

Still, a tension remains between the visibility of power and the hiddenness of service.

To diminish this tension, we must remember two things.

First, the visible arrangement of seating does not — and cannot — reflect the true spiritual status of the gathered people. Rather these customs pertain to *office*, not *persons*. We should never conclude that the men closest to the altar possess greater importance and holiness than does the poorest widow at the back door.

Second, the ceremonial appearance of Catholic worship, even in its simplest form, resembles a momentary snapshot of a college graduation. When the procession enters the hall, everyone follows a well-planned, traditional and ranked order. However, the procession looks nothing like the daily life of students and teachers. Likewise, Church ceremonials, no matter how brief or long, never accurately depict "real" Church life, which, for the most part, remains

silent and invisible. After all, processions exist to move people — bishops, priests, ministers and choirs — from one place to another in an efficient and orderly way.

Third, the Church's solemn liturgical celebrations, especially in Rome, have existed for centuries. Think about classical music. When orchestras change their conductors, the new ones cannot alter the music itself. However, the performance may sound different — faster, slower and so on — but the music remains essentially the same.

Pope Francis, for sure, respects and loves Catholic worship. He carefully follows the *Ceremonial for Bishops* and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the two texts that govern seating, the order of processions, vesture and so on.

Now to three specific points raised by your daughter.

First, the seating of cardinals separately from the religious sisters on Christmas Eve pertains to the *distinction* between the ordained and lay faithful during liturgical events. In other settings, cardinals, sisters, and others may sit together.

On January 10, Pope Francis issued a fascinating decree that reaffirmed the linkage between baptism and ministry, whether ordained or not.

He wrote: "A doctrinal development has taken place in recent years which has highlighted how certain ministries instituted by the Church are based on the *common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism.*"

This means that qualified women may now enter the *formal orders* of lector and acolyte. This opens the possibility for the baptized faithful — now both men and women — to become *permanent* lectors and acolytes without becoming deacons or priests.

Second, the close proximity of the cardinals to the sanctuary symbolizes the nature of the College of Cardinals, who act as the principal collaborators of the pope. As a "college," they sit and move as a single organism, just as units move in a parade.

Third, from a purely spiritual perspective, many would agree that the mostly hidden work of sisters has greater effect than the "worldly" work of those who hold power. For sure, the holiest sisters would never agree with this. But we must remember that the ranks of canonized sisters far surpass the small band of saintly cardinals.

And please remember: the parade is not the army. And the procession is not the Church, the Bride of Christ, whose mystery remains mostly out of sight. ■