

What is Zeal?
3rd Sunday of Lent (B)
(Jn 2:13-25)

Jesus had a special zeal for the Temple, as evidenced by the incident when he was twelve (Lk 2:41-50), and by his efforts to expel the marketplace from the Temple precincts in today's Gospel. The Bible often speaks of the love and zeal Jews had for the Temple in Jerusalem, for example Psalm 69:9 which is quoted in the Gospel, and Psalm 84. *Zeal is the eagerness and enthusiasm of love.* Zeal must avoid the extremes of fanaticism (which violates the rights of others) and sloth (joyless inaction). We need to have zeal only for that which is truly important.

Like Jesus, this means having "zeal for God's house," manifested in the way we take care of the parish church. Even more than the Temple, because of the Eucharist, this church is the dwelling of God, and our love for God draws us to this place. Zeal for God is manifested by parishioners in the way they: 1) keep it clean, 2) perform repairs when there are problems, 3) adequately fund the needs of the parish through stewardship.

Our zeal for God's House is also shown in the way we comport ourselves within the church. A Catholic Church is completely unlike any other building, auditorium, or concert hall. And even though we respect the churches of other non-Catholics, they too are completely different from a Catholic church, due to the Eucharist within the Tabernacle.

The Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus, and later this year (August) when we hear the readings from John 6 we will reflect more on what this "Living Bread" is "which comes down from heaven" every time we celebrate Mass. The Eucharist is the reason Catholics have a special reverence and zeal for their churches. The marks of this Zeal include:

-Genuflecting. When we enter, before we leave, and any time we pass before the tabernacle, we acknowledge the presence of the Lord and bow our right knee to the ground. We do not do this for anyone else, it shows our zeal for the Lord. Even when we happen to pass a Catholic Church on the road, we should acknowledge the presence of the Lord by a sign of reverence, such as making the sign of the cross.

-Dress. We dress respectfully for the house of God, in our good festive attire that is dignified and appropriate to the formal occasion of the liturgy.

-Quiet. Jesus says the Temple is a "House of Prayer" (Mt 21:13). We are zealous in observing the silence in church necessary for prayer, by avoiding any casual conversations in church, putting away phones (unless we are using them for

prayer), and avoiding any loud or distracting behaviour. We don't run or "horse around" in church. Children need to be taught how to sit still in the pew, and not play with or damage the hymnals.

-Training little ones. This is a special challenge for parents who have small children. But it is important that even they learn from a very young age what it means to be in God's house, and how to be still. I recommend that parents *not* utilize the "cry room" with small toddlers, since it is the worst place for them to learn about silence. Instead, they should be with their parents and everyone else in the nave, *until* they start to cry or become distracting. At that point they need to be taken to the cry room, the narthex, or outside until they calm down. Parents may have to get up and take their child out several times if necessary, so that they are not distracting others from the liturgy. It may be difficult for a couple months, but the effort will have good results when the child comes to understand how the special silence of church fosters true prayer.

-Food, Drink, Gum. The Eucharist is "Bread from Heaven." Jesus gives us spiritual food and drink in his Body and Blood. Our Zeal for God's House and this special food requires that no ordinary food be consumed or even brought in to the church (exception: baby formula). This applies in a special way to chewing gum, which is candy, and which is actually being physically "eaten" in a most distracting and obvious way. No gum in church! Zeal for the Eucharist requires that we forego earthly food and drink even an hour before coming to Mass.

-Participation. We must participate in the liturgical action (prayers, hymns) with eagerness and enthusiasm, and listen to the readings attentively.

-Timeliness. Don't arrive late, or leave early. Zeal for the house of God requires that we participate fully in the Mass, from beginning to end.

In all these ways, we show zeal and love for the House of God, for the Lord. They may seem like small or unimportant things, but when we understand that zeal is "love in action," we see that they are indeed very important. Many at the time of Jesus didn't think twice about having the animal exchange conveniently located within the Temple precincts, until Jesus showed them it was wrong.

The example of Jesus shows one more important characteristic of zeal. Not only must we personally have love and respect for God's house and the Eucharist, we must also collectively ensure that God's house and the Eucharist *are respected*. When something is out of order or inappropriate, or when someone accidentally or intentionally violates the dignity of the church, it must be addressed.

In a prudent, charitable, respectful way, zeal requires that we act. With regard to building maintenance issues, this means notifying the office, *and* being prepared personally to volunteer some time or provide financial assistance as necessary. (Sometimes people simply complain about things and expect others to fix the problems, yet do nothing on their part to assist).

With regard to inappropriate or disrespectful behavior on the part of others, it is more delicate. It is first of all the responsibility of parents to teach and discipline their children. (Parents shouldn't have to be told by others their children are out of line.) Unfortunately, sometimes it is the adults themselves whose behavior is disrespectful, and this makes it embarrassing to have to confront them. But it must be done, either by you when you are sitting next to them, or if you feel uncomfortable, inform an usher, or the priest, depending on how serious the issue is.

The reason we sometimes avoid saying anything, is because we fear the person is going to react negatively: "*who are you to tell me what to do?*" But zeal needs to be greater than fear. This is exactly how the Pharisees responded when Jesus confronted the marketplace in the Temple: "*What sign have you to show us for doing this?*" It didn't prevent Jesus from acting, but it showed the pride and hardness of heart in his enemies. If someone – especially the priest – calls to your attention a problem that needs to be addressed, don't get huffy or upset, be humble and grateful for the correction.

When it comes to confronting others, here is where the balance of true zeal is very important. Zeal acknowledges both the dignity and reverence for the House of God, and the dignity and reverence for the neighbor who may not understand, or may be a visitor. We don't want to be so fanatical about reverence that we unnecessarily insult someone; nor do we want to be so slothful that we allow the serious issues outlined above to slide, encouraging irreverent informality and disrespect.

Among all the various things that may need to be addressed, one stands out as paramount. If the Eucharist is in danger of being desecrated, zeal must move us to act immediately. For instance, if you ever observe someone bringing the Sacred Host back to the pew, or taking it out of the mouth, immediately request the Host from the person and bring it back to the priest at the sanctuary; or immediately go up to the priest and inform him of the situation, even if he is still distributing Communion.

The Gospel says, "Zeal for the house of God consumed" Jesus. We too must have zeal for God's House, for the Lord, for the parish, for the Holy Eucharist.