
Church Brings Out the Rote in All of Us!

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

It's an almost automatic process for frequent participants in Holy Communion. If our habit is to kneel at the altar rail each Sunday, we do so while at the same time holding out our outstretched palms. It's automatic. We do it by rote. We kneel and extend our hands out for communion, without even thinking about it. Except it's Ash Wednesday this time! And we are supposed to be receiving ashes on our foreheads, without using our hands at all!

When I, as a priest, greet people following the 4:00 Evensong service, they are very gracious; and they greet me out of polite, and appreciated, habit. Then, they say, automatically, "Good morning!" They do it by rote. Except it is the afternoon!

Almost every priest I know has also been greeted after the service with, "That was a good sermon, pastor," and they are always appreciative. Except, they did not deliver the sermon that day!

In the same way, we are all used to saying things like "Happy Birthday!" So, when it is Easter at church, the greeting is a joyful, "Happy Easter!" or an excited, "Merry Christmas!" We do it by rote. But what if the day, or season, is not supposed to be exactly "Happy?" That happened to me this last Ash Wednesday. A church guest was being perfectly polite. He greeted me at church with the words, "Happy Ash Wednesday!" And he meant it. I was glad to get the greeting.

But is Ash Wednesday supposed to be a happy day? During this holy season of Lent, what exactly is our ecclesiastical greeting supposed to be? "Happy Lent?" Perhaps it is supposed to be "Blessed Lent." Or "Holy Lent."

Well, in my opinion, any sincere greeting will do just fine. In the long run, it is good to do things by rote in the Church. I know that learning "by rote" can seem out of fashion. It means we sometimes recite tables and declinations and greetings without really thinking about what we mean, without engaging in creative or abstract thinking.

Yes, talking without thinking can be a bad thing! On the other hand, many of the things we do, or say, out of habit, are good and useful parts of society. "Good morning!" is a pleasant and excellent greeting! "Happy Day to you!" is also a helpful greeting! And knowing multiplication tables and periodic tables and language tenses is necessary in this world!

What does, or did, the word "rote" originally mean, anyway? Well, it looks like the word, "rote" has uncertain historical background. But it might have meant, not just the "root" of something, but the "heart" of something. That's why another way of saying we have learned something "by rote," is to say that we have learned something "by heart."

I always want us to act and think creatively and abstractly! But I also want us to act and think out of habit, out of good and healthy habit. Thus, I do not mind if we say things in Church "by rote." When we say prayers like the Lord's Prayer by rote, it does not mean that we are wasting the words. It means we are saying the prayers so often that they are becoming part of our hearts. We are saying the Lord's Prayer "by heart."

Yes, Church brings out the "rote" in all of us! What I mean is that, "Church brings out the heart in all of us!" Here's to a happy and blessed and holy and sincere Lent, for us all. We follow the seasonal rota once again. I look forward to repeating

ancient prayers, traditional formulas, over and over again, until they are truly part of my heart.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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