

The Great Divide

If you have ever visited any of our old cathedral churches, you will have seen that many of them have a particularly prominent feature, the rood or choir screen, which divides the chancel (or sanctuary)(the area containing the main altar and the choir benches) from the nave (the main body of the church where the people sit). The rood screen is virtually a wall of carved or decorated stone or wood with a doorway or an arch in the middle giving access to the choir and altar. The word *rood* means “cross” and refers to the crucifix located above the screen often accompanied also by the figures of Mary and St John. In some churches the “screen” is not a wall as such but just a beam arching across the church with, again, the figures on top. As a visual feature, the image of the Calvary group could be easily seen by people throughout the church and provided them with a focal point during the liturgical celebration of Christ’s passion and death at the altar which they very often couldn’t see.

The purpose of the rood screen was basically two-fold, firstly to quite literally create a barrier between the celebrants and the people, and, secondly, to physically prevent people from entering the sacred space of the sanctuary.

We might find ourselves getting irritated at times with the disturbance and distraction that can be a feature of a typical Sunday congregation in our parish churches, but they are as nothing compared to how things used to be – especially in large cathedral churches. It is recorded that they were often more like market places than churches, with people coming and going, and dogs and other animals wandering through and people chatting away and taking very little notice of what was going on at the altar. In large churches there was one good reason for this general lack of attention: people could hardly even see the altar to know what was going on because it was located about as far away from them as it was possible to get and there may well have been a rood or choir screen in the way also. Then too, of course, in an age before microphones and loudspeakers, people would have had difficulty hearing what the priest was saying – especially as he had his back to them (saying Mass facing the wall).

This is probably where the practice of ringing a bell at the consecration came from, to draw people’s attention to the fact that something important was going on at the altar and, later in the Mass, to call them forward at communion time. It was probably also where the pulpit came from - by being able to speak from a raised platform in the body of church meant the priest could be more easily heard as he read the epistle and gospel to the people and gave his sermon.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the *iconostasis* serves the same purpose - a solid wall of icons and other sacred art with a central door and curtain separating the nave and sanctuary. Even more so than in our own churches, the iconostasis

was designed to completely block the people's view of the sanctuary, heightening their sense of the mystery and sacredness of what was taking place beyond the screen and which was primarily the business of the priest and his assistants. At various significant points in the Divine Liturgy, one of those assistants comes through to the people's side of the screen bearing a thurible (incense featuring far more prominently than in our Mass) which has a number of small bells attached to each of its chains. This provides both a visual and (like our sanctuary bell) an audible link for the people with what is taking place at the altar.

Of course very few parish churches were designed with a full rood or choir screen, but they would have had a remnant, a mini version of that barrier: the altar rails. Those of us "of a certain age" will remember a time when no one was allowed beyond the rails during Mass except for the priest and the altar servers. Even when Mass wasn't being celebrated only the sacristan and church cleaners were permitted to enter, but even then only to carry out the work they had to do. It's one of the main reasons why, even after those restrictions were lifted, people were (some still are) reluctant to volunteer for jobs and ministries which involved entering the sanctuary so ingrained was the "unworthiness" exile that had gone before.

Most of us who grew up with altar rails probably never realised they were a remnant of the rood screen. True they were a physical barrier which kept people out of the sanctuary, but they didn't block our view of the altar and so they weren't as severe a barrier as would have been the case with a screen wall. And, of course, they were given a very different use for people to lean against as they knelt to receive communion – which was probably all people ever thought they were for. (Some even had a white cloth which covered them at communion to catch any hosts that might have been accidentally dropped and which missed the communion plate that the server held at our throat - remember?) When the change of practice was introduced which allowed us to receive communion standing, the altar rails no longer served that particular purpose, nor any other for that matter.

Many of the changes that were introduced by the Vatican Council in the way Mass was to be celebrated were intended to "open up" the Mass and invite a greater participation on the part of the people. Prior to that, going to Mass was almost like going to the theatre or to a concert in the sense that the priest "performed" and the congregation passively sat and watched. Many even came with "programme" in hand for the performance: their own version of the missal that helped them to follow what was happening on the other side of priest (who had his back to them) and to read the prayers in English which he said indistinctly and mostly to himself in Latin. Now the Mass was in English, the altar had been brought forward and turned around so everyone could see and hear what

was happening, and the invitation and opportunity was extended to everyone to be a part of something which was no longer the preserve of the priest but was once again the communal celebration it used to be and is meant to be.

A great aid to that experience was opening up the sanctuary so that it became, as far as possible, part of the body of the church (as we see in our modern church buildings) contributing to the idea that we are gathered together around the altar and not separated from it. The physical presence of altar rails literally stood in the way of achieving this new physical and visual opening up of the celebration of Mass and, being in all respects redundant now, wherever possible they were removed.

Exceptions were often made where the design of the altar rails was felt to be integral to that of the church interior and sanctuary, but if they had never been there in the first place that would never have been a consideration. The main problem has been the close association in some people's minds of the altar rails with the act of receiving communion and that if they weren't kneeling at the rails they weren't going to communion properly.* Somehow they never seemed to associate the altar rails with division (us and them) and separation (priest and people) which is primarily what they were for, as we've seen, and something that is difficult to justify anymore.

*[We can, of course, receive communion just as reverently standing as kneeling and for those who may be infirm or who struggle to kneel it is certainly a more comfortable way to receive the sacrament. In this regard it is perhaps worth remembering that our Bishops' Conference has said that "it is through the action of walking solemnly in procession that the faithful make their sign of reverence in preparation for receiving Communion"¹ and that we therefore don't need to perform any other gesture of reverence such as bowing or genuflecting or kneeling. (What in fact happens when someone does genuflect or kneel or whatever, is that they become the focus of attention rather than the Blessed Sacrament.)]

How the removal of altar rails was received seems to have depended on how things were explained and perceived at the time, but in a number of cases it was almost like a scene from a Frankenstein film where the villagers rise up and march to the castle at night carrying flaming torches to expel the monster from their town! That's almost how some unfortunate priests were treated who suggested the removal of the rails. The Spanish Inquisition would have been more warmly received. And yet why? Why did, why does, the removal of altar rails provoke such a reaction? They were, and are, a barrier, they divide and separate, and that is the very opposite of what our eucharistic gatherings are all about.

It may be argued, and not without some justification, that opening up the sanctuary by removing the altar rails coincided with a gradual decline in "a sense of the sacred". The fact that only certain people were allowed to enter the

¹ *Celebrating the Mass*, para 210.

sanctuary helped to maintain a sense of mystery – the sanctuary housed the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament and it was the place where holy things happened. When we came into church, the sanctuary lamp drew our attention to that sacred space and to the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament – as it still does. We genuflected to the tabernacle – as we still should. There was a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of the sacred. These days people wander into church, often with hardly any acknowledgement that they have come into God’s house and into his presence, and all too often their conduct and the way they dress seems to reflect little appreciation of what is appropriate in church.

But I think all of this has less to do with the absence of altar rails than it has with falling standards of education in the faith and its practice. Figuratively speaking, people have got to look beyond the altar rails (whether they are there or not) and recognise and acknowledge the sacred. We have to ensure that we pass on not just the practices, but their purpose, to our children and so instil in them a sense of reverence for the sacred. And we have to look to ourselves and our own practice and the sort of example we are setting in terms of reverence and respect and the witness we give to our own sense of the sacred.

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Fr Neil McNicholas