

The Habit of a Lifetime

They say you can always tell a Catholic at the cinema because they will genuflect to the screen as they leave! (and don't pretend you haven't done it, or almost done it, on occasion). For those "of a certain age" it's almost an automatic reflex if we are not concentrating hard on the fact that we are coming out of a cinema and not a church¹. But unfortunately I'm not sure that that is the best or healthiest approach to our faith – that such an action has become mechanical, that we are doing things out of habit without even thinking about them or their significance.

Take this past Holy Week for example. The tabernacle is required to be empty for the start of the "Mass of the Lord's Supper" on Holy Thursday and so the Blessed Sacrament is removed. The tabernacle door at St Hilda's was therefore wide open and the sanctuary lamp had been removed to confirm the absence of the Blessed Sacrament. And this was still the situation on Good Friday also. I wonder how many people who came to those services automatically genuflected to the Blessed Sacrament without even realising (or looking to see) that it wasn't there and that the tabernacle was empty?

Similarly the holy water stoups are emptied before the Mass on Holy Thursday and I usually cover them with a white cloth so as to make it clear that the stoups are "out of service" as it were, empty of holy water. On occasion I have later found indentations in the cloth where people have dipped their fingers into the cloth(!) because it is such an automatic action as they come into church that not even the fact that the stoups were covered and empty stopped them.

Both these things are examples of doing something out of force of habit – not in itself a bad thing in one sense, but shouldn't we be carrying out religious actions like this with a little more reflection than simply being on "autopilot"?

Even if there had been notices on the doors going in to church to say that the tabernacle was empty it probably wouldn't have made any difference because no one seems to read notices anymore. As a "for instance", there are symbols quite clearly posted on the doors into our churches asking people to switch off their mobile phones in church and there is a notice in every newsletter also. In the middle of holy communion on Saturday a mobile phone started ringing - and why? Because no one reads or takes any notice of signs and notices. People have also become so used to being permanently "in touch with the universe" through our mobiles that they don't give any thought to the fact that being in

¹ Sadly for many of the younger generation, genuflecting isn't even something they do in church anymore these days.

certain places and buildings means that phones should be switched off. That's one thing that *should* be automatic but, ironically, it isn't.

Someone asked me in the street last week if there were confessions on Holy Saturday. It was in the newsletter that there wouldn't be and I had explained why. Also was the church open? Again it had been in the newsletter that it wouldn't be and why. Does anyone actually read the newsletter? Are they not bothered about what they might be uninformed about if they don't?

I'll hear someone come into church during confessions and their footsteps across the church directly to the confessional, and they'll totally ignore the sign right in front of them inviting them to spend some time in prayerful preparation first. Unless they read it, how do they know the sign doesn't say: "Wet paint" or "Please don't come in" or something else they ought to be aware of – which it does: that they should spend some time in prayerful preparation for the sacrament. If they have read it, why do they ignore it? Maybe they think it only applies to everyone else.

As I say, if people don't read signs, how do they know they aren't missing important information that they really ought to know like: "Beware - Mine Field" for example, otherwise, surely, the signs and notices wouldn't be there in the first place? So many people just seem to walk around in a little world of their own. It always amazes me that more aren't knocked over crossing the street against the lights or looking in the wrong direction at crossings, that more don't find themselves sitting on freshly painted benches, or that people aren't constantly falling into the harbour having not noticed the sudden drop! And yet I'd bet if there was a notice saying that £10 notes were being given away free, that would be one sign they wouldn't miss!

But let's get back to the subject of doing things on autopilot.

I remember a retreat director telling the story of his giving a retreat to a community of Sisters. One of his talks was on the subject of analysing scripture, the official term for which is *exegesis*. He suddenly realised that every time he mentioned the word, everyone's head would bow as he said "gesis"! Again an automatic action in response to a sound (Jesus) – in itself admirably reverent, but lacking a little in purpose if it was simply an autopilot response.

In the middle of a scripture reading, the words "through Christ our Lord" will occur and there will inevitably be a number of people who will respond "Amen" even though it wasn't even a prayer, much less the end of one. It's that autopilot thing again – they hear a familiar formula ("through Christ our Lord") and so the response must be "Amen".

Once upon a time, back in the days of the Latin Mass, it was the custom to beat our breast three times during the “Lamb of God”. We also used to make the sign of cross toward the end of the prayer just before that (but only because the priest did) at the words “and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever.” When the liturgy was reformed and the new missal published between 1969 and 1974, those actions were omitted and yet nearly forty years later some people (again “of a certain age”) are still beating their breast and crossing themselves because it happens automatically at the sound of the words. Again it may not be wrong, but does it mean anything if it is happening without our giving it a thought? And maybe that’s why those actions were discontinued.

People will often mention in confession having difficulty paying attention during Mass (which isn’t in itself necessarily a sin), and it’s because they are so familiar with the format of the Mass that their bodies are there but their minds are elsewhere. (It’s worth mentioning, of course, that every Mass is actually quite different especially the Liturgy of the Word and the choice of Eucharistic Prayer.) It’s also why we can find ourselves struggling with our prayers. We tend to say the same ones all the time and, again, our minds are on autopilot because they aren’t needed. When you have finished the Rosary, for example, how many of the individual prayers can you remember saying? (autopilot). We need to find ways of engaging our minds more by varying the way in we pray or where we pray, and using things such as an icon or a candle to help us focus on what we are doing.

It’s also why, for example, using a mobile phone while driving is against the law. We can drive “with our eyes shut” as it were (not literally of course) and so if our attention were then to be diverted even further by concentrating on the conversation we are having on the phone (just as it can be by listening to the car radio or having an involved conversation with a passenger – our minds can go “walkabout”) then the resulting inattention could be fatal.

So much of what we do every day has become automatic, second nature. Have you ever stopped to wonder whether you are still breathing? We never think about it – it just happens and a good job too! Most of us find our way home every time we’ve been out without giving it a second thought. It’s a wonder we don’t worry more whether we have remembered to get dressed before we go out because we tend to do that without thinking also! - which is, of course, the basis of the dream people commonly have of being in a public place and suddenly realising they have no clothes on.

Our habits are not necessarily bad habits, indeed many are good, but we do need to be more aware of what we are doing (or not doing) in order to be sure. And this surely applies very specially to our relationship with God and our spiritual

and religious practices. If a lot of the time we are on autopilot, what might that be saying about our spiritual lives and that relationship? Are we doing things as consciously and deliberately as we should? Are they, therefore, as meaningful – especially to God – as they should be? Think about that next time you genuflect coming out of a cinema or find yourself in the Co-op without any trousers on!

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