

The spirituality of sacristans: What this often overlooked role has to teach the church



Terence Sweeney March 16, 2023

In the back of my parish church, you can find small plaques with the names and dates of the past pastors of St. Francis de Sales. In the rectory, the hallways have old paintings and newer photographs of those same bishops and priests. One can find, at the parish school, the list of members of the Immaculate Heart Sisters who, as principals, have helped guide children from ignorance to knowledge, from poverty to opportunity. But nowhere—in parish, rectory or school—can you find a plaque, photo or list of the sacristans who have served the church between 1890 and today. And that, I think, is exactly how they would want it.

We sacristans are an unremarkable lot. We lay out vestments and books, chalices and ciboria; we switch the frontals to the right color, light a coal in the thurible, ring bells and then head for our pews. Good sacristans, at their best, are *not* noticed. A good homily is obvious, but how the bread made it into the ciborium should not be. It is simply expected to be there.

Sacristans are rarely mentioned in spiritual writings. Blessed Jordan of Saxony does mention us, but not in a good way. He admonishes theologians not to be “like sacristans, whose familiarity with the church causes them to forget to genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament.” The good Dominican was right about the hazards of the role. Many times have I hurried by the tabernacle with only the quickest of head nods.

Love is as much shown in small acts of care and attention as it is in big words and bold deeds.

But the role also comes with many blessings. In looking more closely at what sacristans do, we might move closer to the spiritual truths found in all of us—from the pope in Rome to the discontented teenager in the pew behind you. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (a real page-turner) mentions sacristans as having “a liturgical function,” which does not offer us much to work with. In contrast, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* has more to say about sacristans. The first reading of it seems dull, mundane even. But to dwell with the text for a little is to glimpse the heart of the spirituality of a sacristan. For sacristans dare to believe—with their hands as much as with their hearts—that dull, mundane things are the thresholds between the earthly world and the divine: instruments of transformation.

So what do we do? The *Ceremonial* says we arrange “the books needed for the celebration” and lay out “vestments, cruets, chalices, ciboria, linens, oils, processional crosses, candles, and torches.” Who “takes care of the ringing of bells”? Why, the sacristan, of course. We also aim to keep everything in good condition and send certain items for “gilding or repair.” We wash linens and iron them too, light sanctuary candles and clean holy water stoups. And of course we check to make sure that there is “a ready supply of fresh hosts and of duly authorized wine.”

Each thing we do is tangible. We lay our hands on things and feel in their ruddy goodness the readiness for God. We even hope for our own readiness for God. None of this is alien to anyone who has served at table or hosted a dinner. It is the stuff of every day. The more spiritual among us might forget the holiness of the ordinary, but the sacristan simply cannot. And as we clean wax off yet another altar cloth, we cannot forget that we too are ordinary. (Priests are too, but that is more easily forgotten, as it is their hands that elevate the host, anoint with oil and absolve in the darkness of the confessional booth.)

While some may scoff at a sacristan's concern for liturgical details, we know to let this roll off our backs. Love is as much shown in small acts of care and attention as it is in big words and bold deeds. A sacristan's task is to attend to those small acts of care in a world and church that are too often inattentive and careless.

Remember that amid all the ordinary "stuff" of a sacristan's ministry, we are elevated not by what we do but what God does. Still, we do, by God's grace, do something.

Ordinary things and small acts do not sound like the makings of a vocation, but in fact they are at the heart of every vocation. You cannot help but remember this as you put unconsecrated hosts and low-quality wine into vessels and send them on their way to become not only holy but actually "the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ." If wine of that caliber can become Jesus, what can I become if I let God work on me? Of course, the cheap wine doesn't make itself divine, God does. We are not so different.

This is the lesson the sacristan's role has for the church: Remember that amid all the ordinary "stuff" of a sacristan's ministry, we are elevated not by what we do but what God does. Still, we do, by God's grace, do something. Or maybe, more accurately, we help others do something. Nothing I will ever do will consecrate the holy Eucharist, but I do get the hosts from the basement closet. I will never anoint a dying person, but I have retrieved cotton balls and the *oleum infirmorum* so the priest could. I have even changed a lightbulb in a confessional. All we do is enable the holy work of others. And that, too, is holy.

I will not get a plaque or a portrait in a church, but that is fine. At the end of Sunday Masses, I grab a taper and light one wick in the candlestand before Mary's altar and one before Joseph's. If I don't, people won't have a flame with which to light their candle. Recently, a woman touched my arm and said, "Thank you" and then lit her candle, knelt and prayed.

In this, the spirituality of sacristans sheds a little light on the spirituality of, well, everyone. Parents enable their children, teachers their students, priests their flocks. We cannot be the people our children will be for them, we cannot learn on behalf of our students, or convert our flocks by ourselves. All we can do is lay out what is needed, prepare what requires preparing and then join the congregation in expectation of the God who does the real work anyhow.

Terence Sweeney

Terence Sweeney is an adjunct professor of philosophy at Villanova University and theologian in residence at the Collegium Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

@TerenceJSweeney

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/03/16/sacristan-church-teaching-244930>
viewed 30 Mar 2023