

# RESTORING A SENSE OF THE SACRED



**T**he Maronites begin their liturgical year with one or two Sundays before they enter into the their time of Advent: the Sundays of the Consecration and Renewal of the Church. These feasts actually find their inspiration, at least in part, from an event that took place in Old Testament times, namely when the Jews re-consecrated the Temple after it was profaned by the Greek pagans under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C.

After the Maccabees successfully revolted against the Greeks, the Jews once more had political control in Israel and one of the first things they did after coming to power was to re-consecrate the Temple which the pagans had desecrated. The Jews still commemorate this event in their feast of Hanukkah every year. If we reflect on this feast of the Consecration of the Church in the light of

this re-consecration of the Temple it raises some questions for us: What does it mean to consecrate something? What takes place when something is consecrated? What effect does consecration have?

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To consecrate something means to make it holy. We make something holy, in the first place, by separating it from common, everyday, profane use. What is made holy is somehow set apart and made distinct from profane, worldly use so as to be dedicated in some way to God and His service.

There are many examples we could consider. We consecrate our church buildings, especially the altars in our churches. We take these structures, which we have built out of common materials, and make them holy by a ritual that sets them apart as dedicated in a special way to the service of God. And because of this, a church should not

be used like any other space. We should act **differently** in church than in other places by keeping silence, for example, and by dressing in a way that shows a special respect for this place. These are ways in which we manifest that this place is sacred, set apart from everyday, profane use.

Besides consecrating churches and places, there are also certain **times** that are consecrated. God Himself has consecrated Sundays as holy days. Sunday is a day set apart from the other days of the week. It is a time set apart for God as time dedicated to Him, and so Sundays should be different from other days of the week.

We also consecrate **objects** for divine service. The chalice we use at Mass is specially consecrated and made holy. It would be a sacrilege to use a chalice for some profane purpose. At Mass we speak of consecrating the bread and the wine. At the time of the consecration the bread and the wine are taken out of the profane sphere and brought into the sphere of the sacred. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear how the Temple sanctuary was divided into the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. In other words, there are degrees of holiness. When we come to the Eucharist, we have entered the Holy of Holies. There is nothing more sacred in the Church than the Eucharist, the very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ and so it should be treated with supreme reverence.

And finally, certain **people** are consecrated as well. By virtue of baptism, Christians have been made holy and have been consecrated to God. This is why Christians, though they live in the midst of the world, should somehow be distinct from the world. There should be a dif-

ference between the way they live and act from those who have not received the consecration of baptism. And then there are those in the Church, such as priests and religious, who have received an additional consecration either through the sacrament of Holy Orders or the profession of vows. They are also set apart in a special way for the service of God.



Unfortunately, this notion that there are certain times and places and people who are consecrated and made holy and set apart in a special way has been largely eroded in the modern world. In the West we have all but lost the sense of the sacred. The very distinction between the sacred and the profane is called into question and derided. In our secular, scientifically-minded age many would ask: Is there really something different about the space contained within the four walls of a church and any other building? Is Sunday really any different than any other period of 24 hours of the week? And what about

consecrated people? Are they really any different than others? Should they be treated differently than others?

So what is the basis for this distinction between the sacred and the profane? What kind of reason can one give for maintaining that some things are holy, some things are sacred, and others are not? The basis for the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the very large and important fact that God is wholly other. God infinitely transcends any creature He has made. God is completely **holy**, He is set apart and distinct from His creation. And so when certain times and places and persons are taken up and set aside, as dedicated to the divine service, they come to participate in some way in this holiness of God.

The more we come to know God in his holiness, the more we are given a knowledge and experience of the mystery, the power, and the awesome majesty of God, the more we will grow in a sense of the sacred. Those times, places, and persons who participate in the divine are sacred and they should be treated differently because of this participation in the mystery of God.

The modern world, when it has not completely rejected or ignored God, has often reduced Him to our own level and so denied His holiness. If we wish to restore the sense of the sacred we must come to a knowledge of God as He really is. How do we come to know that? Who really **knows** what God is like? Where do we go to grow in our knowledge of God? In the Gospel for the feast of the Consecration and Renewal of the Church taken from Matthew, chapter 16, Jesus asks His disciples about His identity: “who do men say that I am?” And the Apostles respond by telling Him what men are saying: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” There is one thing in common about these responses: they are all wrong. Although they all at least acknowledge that Christ is somehow a man

of God, they fall very far short of the truth. If we wish to know the truth about Jesus and about God we should not look to the opinions of men. To do so is to find them defective. In contrast, Peter, by means of a divine revelation, gives the true answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This shows us that if we want to know Christ, and if we want to know God we must share in the faith of Peter.

True knowledge of God comes above all from what God has revealed of Himself to us. And this knowledge comes to us through the apostles and the Church. We can also come to a better knowledge of God through the approved saints and mystics of the Church. We can listen to those who have been given a more intimate knowledge of God. They are also sure guides to a deeper knowledge of what God is really like. May we through our life of faith and prayer grow in our knowledge of God as He is in reality and by growing in our knowledge of the majesty and the mystery of God also grow in our sense of the sacred.

