

“QUANDO A ROMA, FAI COME I ROMANI”: EMBRACING LOCAL TRADITIONS

I was faced with a choice. Close the window and allow the room to get a little on the stuffy side or keep the window open and risk the **pigeon** cooing on the ledge less than five feet from my bed? Which to choose? I mean, how expensive could it be to install a window screen? Or pads on the kneelers? And **charging** one Euro to use a restroom at the train station? You gotta be kidding me! Why do so many Romans wear winter coats when it is 60 degrees outside? These are all **questions** only an outsider would ask— and here I definitely fit that bill. But it caused me to reflect on local customs and how “provincial” we all can tend to be. With each passing year, people become more set in their ways...trust me, I speak from experience. But alas, I am not alone! When **Monica**, Augustine’s sainted mother, came from Rome to be with him in Milan, she was troubled by some of the customs that differed from those in Rome.

One such custom was that they **did not fast** on Saturdays in Milan. Augustine, not even yet baptized, (but well on the way to his conversion) sought the advice of **St. Ambrose**, the Bishop of Milan. He recounts an episode in a work entitled, “On the Inquiries of Januarius.” The responses have come down to us as **Epistles 54 and 55**. They were written ca. 400 A.D. so Augustine is recounting an episode from approximately fifteen years earlier. It was in a long reply to a notary named **Januarius**, about whom we know little else. But the episode stuck with him. I wonder if perhaps Monica’s **scruple** was his own? After all, Augustine too had many questions, even if he indicates that they differed somewhat from those of his mother. It’s easy to imagine Augustine sheepishly approaching Ambrose: “Ahem...bishop, may I trouble you for just a moment?”

Noting that his mother has a sensitive conscience, he inquired about any advice that he could share with her (and himself) on the question of **varying customs**. Ambrose’s answer was most interesting. He began by quipping that if there was **any better** practice than they had in Milan, he would surely follow it! I guess few like it when **outsiders** question their customs! Perhaps he said it tongue in cheek, I don’t know. But the simplicity of the reply detracts not one *iota* from its profundity. Neither give nor receive scandal by casting a **quick judgment** on another custom— you may end up only demonstrating your ignorance. Just because they are unfamiliar to me, does not equate to these customs being illegitimate, provided of course that they are not scandalous and contrary to faith and morals. Ambrose wisely added that caveat in his reply.

His reply is that of a seasoned and wise bishop, who understood the differences among doctrine, discipline and custom. But it also challenges the thinking of those who **fail** to make these **distinctions**. Ambrose replied that controversy that is stirred by those who “think **nothing is right** except what they do themselves” (ut nisi quod ipsi faciunt, nihil rectum existiment. *ep. 54, 3*) dismays the weak, putting everyone’s peace of mind at risk. But then he pivots and gives an answer that has withstood the test of time. He said: “When I visit Rome, I fast on Saturday; when I am here [in Milan], I do not fast. (*Cum Romam venio, ieiuno sabbato; cum hic sum, non ieiuno.*) On the same principle, **observe the custom** prevailing in whatever Church you come to, if you desire neither to give offense by your conduct, nor to find cause of offense in another’s.”

This is the likely **origin** of the popular aphorism, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” St. Augustine then related to Januarius that he esteemed this advice “as if I had received it by an oracle from heaven.” For us today, the issue of respecting local tradition comes into play even at the parish level. For example, there are certain expectations as well as particularities at the Cathedral that would not necessarily fly at other parishes. I hope that people understand this when they come

to visit. For example, we do **all seven** readings at the Easter Vigil. Cathedral liturgies should not **cut corners** on the major feasts, as we strive to set an example of the beauty of the Church's liturgy. Guitar music, however appropriate in some parishes, would be difficult to pull off in this space, from an **acoustical** perspective alone. The liturgy here tends to be a bit more formal than in some parishes. We strive to produce **high-quality** weekly bulletins and **liturgy guides** that demonstrate our commitment to the beauty of the sacred liturgy. Our excellent staff is 100% committed to these ideals.

Custom is in no way equivalent to doctrine, nor does it render liturgical or canon law irrelevant. But it does carry **weight** and ought not be dismissed. New pastors should not immediately change local parish customs to suit their own preferences. It is far better to seek to **understand** a community and its own strengths, even as a good leader also must evaluate how and when to move forward. My brief sojourn in Rome reminded me that while I may question certain customs, it is much more respectful to adjust my expectations, embracing a culture through a different lens. The alternative only leads to frustration. Life is too short! But c'mon, no window screen?

- Thirty of us U. S. Missionaries of Mercy were treated to a magnificent after-hours tour of the Sistine Chapel by **Elizabeth Lev**, arguably the most talented English-speaking docent for the Vatican Museum. Fantastico! It crossed my mind to **duck away** from the group and spend all night admiring the artwork. However, the prospect of explaining to Archbishop Hebda why he needed to **bail me out** of the Vatican **clink**—I reconsidered! But it would have been amazing!
- With the death of **Vicki Thorn** at the age of 72, the church lost a tremendous pioneer in the pro-life movement. Recognizing a need for healing for those who suffered the effects of having experienced an abortion, she founded **Project Rachel**, a retreat for women (and men) who have expressed tremendous regret for a past abortion that affected their life.
- Must be a misprint? Or perhaps a sign of the times. In 2020, more Catholics were baptized in the **Philippines** (1,603,283) than in all of **Europe** (1,533,666)! These figures were provided by Archbishop Charles Brown, the apostolic nuncio. Catholicism first came to the Asian nation 500 years ago.
- In his Divine Mercy homily, **Pope Francis** briefly addressed us Missionaries of Mercy present for the Mass. “I am now speaking to you, missionaries of mercy: if you do not feel forgiven, **do not** carry out your service as a missionary of mercy **until you feel** that forgiveness. The mercy that we have received enables us to dispense a great deal of mercy and forgiveness.”
- May Day! I hope that you can join us for the Archdiocesan **Rosary Procession** on Sunday May 1. Gathering at the State Capitol at 1:30 p.m., with the procession beginning promptly at 2:00 p.m.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector