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The Latin Mass is celebrated in Rome on Sept. 7, 2017. (Dreamstime/Ensens)

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William Shakespeare's exquisite Sonnet 23, about the difficulty of expressing profound love, begins, "As an unperfect actor on the stage ..." One of the lines in this brilliantly complex poem seems to sum up everything that is most powerful about the traditional Latin Mass: "the perfect ceremony of love's rite."

What does that line conjure up for you? For me, there's a hushed sense of participation in something important, something mysterious, profound and beautiful. There's the swish of silk and the stiffness of brocade, the glow of candlelight, the warmth of hardwood, perhaps the sheen of marble columns — unusual and decorative externals prepared, like a beautiful banquet hall, to honor some event of great magnitude. The attendants, intent and concentrated, clothed in ceremonial dress, have forgotten themselves in the careful accomplishment of grave and formal movements, each one an actor with a particular role in the intense drama unfolding.

An actor, you say? Is the traditional Mass like a play, amusing perhaps for those who like dressing up and processing around, but only make-believe in the end? Or an empty and pompous façade?

On the contrary. At its heart is the most real, the most powerful and the most magnificent thing this earth has ever witnessed: the sacrifice of Christ, the perfect Victim, offering himself for us to his Father, re-enacted in an unbloody manner. Its glorious aesthetics "brighten minds, so that they may travel through the lights to the True Light, where Christ is the true door."

By the grace of God, my first experiences with the traditional Mass were far happier than Zita Ballinger Fletcher's. I began attending the traditional Mass as a child — before I could speak or walk — and found it a deeply peaceful experience, conducive to spiritual renewal through sleep. At the age of 4, I was delighted to cover my head in church, my mother having provided me with what I fancied was a rather fetching hunter green tam. Perched on the kneeler, I sang loudly along to the Gloria (garnering some judgmental looks from my fellow Massgoers) and was keen on lighting candles to St. Joseph and Our Lady at the cost of a quarter each. I did feel somewhat repressed by my parents' refusal to fund more than one or two per Sunday. It's hard to think about those days without smiling.

But imperceptibly, Sunday after Sunday, the Mass was at work, laying foundations strong enough to withstand the antireligious influences inevitable to adolescence,

university, early professional life. We all know them: dazzling intellects, charismatic personalities, friends who seem to promise status and wealth and the world to boot if only you'll see things their way, if only you'll call black white, just for a minute.

Without the traditional Mass, I'd be long gone after that glittering and beckoning world. But luckily, the theology and the faith it taught were much too profound to be easily abandoned.

People drop into the traditional Mass for many reasons. But what keeps them coming back is that it is profound: The traditional liturgy best expresses the sense of Christ the spotless Victim, offering himself on behalf of sinful humanity as an infinitely pleasing sacrifice to God the Father.

The reality and the sacredness of Christ's sacrifice are emphasized by the Latin prayers, the precise rubrics, the silence, the bells, the genuflections, the Gregorian chant. Each prayer, each gesture has ancient lineage, each its own part in the masterpiece.

The priest, "another Christ," turns toward God to offer sacrifice on our behalf; we remain behind, uniting our hearts and our wills to his actions, and expressing this unity physically with the holy gestures of ritual: standing, sitting, beating our breasts in repentance, kneeling in humility and adoration. We read the prayers if we wish, but we don't really need to follow every word. We are with Our Lady on Calvary as Christ offers himself for us.

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At the time of Communion, we accomplish "the perfect ceremony of love's rite" by kneeling to receive the most holy Eucharist. Through this reverent action, the body expresses outwardly what the soul professes inwardly. In our souls, we believe the Eucharist is truly God; with our bodies, we express this by kneeling in adoration.

We receive on the tongue to show that we are little and dependent on God, and to recognize that he is giving himself to us; he is the Giver and we the receivers. There is nothing more lovable, more precious and more vulnerable than the Host. This is why only the anointed hands of the priest may touch it.

Over time, those who participate in the "perfect ceremony of love's rite" find it changes them. And so they begin to choose different clothing for Mass, clothing that they feel is more dignified, more in keeping with the sacredness of the occasion. In the absence of a common cultural standard, results can be mixed, yet the desire to express reverence remains sincere.

There is a time-honored custom that while men uncover their heads to show respect, women cover theirs. Thus, as a sign of respect and belief in the holy Eucharist, men remove their hats, while women often keep theirs on or wear a veil. Both men and women do these things to honor the Real Presence in the tabernacle. Like any learned gesture of courtesy, it can feel awkward at first, but soon becomes a natural expression of love and respect.

We live in an unceremonious and egalitarian age. As a result, the ceremonial and sacred atmosphere of the traditional Mass is a countercultural experience. Newcomers, floundering in the unfamiliarity, may find themselves put off or even frustrated by this; in such a context, it is easy to focus on the human failings of one's pew-mates.

Indeed, traditional Massgoers — like everyone else — are weak and sinful creatures. "Unperfect actors," they long to be transformed by "the perfect ceremony of love's rite"; they are thirsty for holiness, reverence, mystery, for all those things in which the new liturgy is sadly deficient.

They are old and young, rich and poor, eccentric and ordinary. What unites them is their desire to participate in the fitting and ceremonious renewal of Christ's sacrifice, confident that this Mass, the lifeblood of the church throughout the centuries, beloved of saints and heroes, offers to God the kind of worship that is his due.

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