

**9th Chaplain's Reflection – October 25, 2010
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"Holiness befits (adorns) Your house, O Lord, forever." (Ps. 93:5)

I wish I could remember the author of this clever statement: "A newly ordained priest is afraid of the altar. But it isn't long before the altar becomes afraid of the priest." Unfortunately my memory fails me. Nevertheless, the adage rings true: familiarity breeds laxity and diminishing respect.

The Jewish priests described in the Old Testament seriously regarded "the Holy." The holy ground of the Temple—the place where God's glory dwelt—and the appointments of the Temple were revered. St. Paul writes:

Now when these things [liturgical items] had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance (Hebrews 9:6–7).

The name of the second part of the tabernacle, called the "Holy of Holies," suggests the awesomeness of the place.

The Second Book of Samuel, chapter 6, recounts a frightening instance that demonstrates the power of the Holy. Uzzah, while driving the cart that carried the Ark of the Covenant, stretches out his hand to steady the Ark when the oxen stumble; God strikes him dead for his "error." I often remember this story when I touch holy appointments in the altar.

The Jews further believed that certain aspects of natural life—birth, death, and the flow of blood and semen—brought human beings into the presence of the Holy. Scripture painstakingly describes how human beings were excluded from and then reintegrated into community and liturgical life after such events.

Such passages remind us to be sober when we encounter the Holy: appointments on the altar, the altar itself, the church proper, defining moments of life and death, and other human beings, made in God's image. St. Paul himself exclaims, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Such passages also remind us of the holiness of God's name. Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we confirm, "hallowed be Thy Name." In the Magnificat, which we sing daily at Matins, the Virgin Mary proclaims, "For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name" (Luke 1:49).

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom once commented that uttering God's name calls His Presence to us, and that Presence either brings sanctification or condemnation to us depending on our motivation. What a cautionary statement!

St. Simeon the New Theologian described his own singular experience of the Holy. Here is a short excerpt:

So I entered the place where I usually prayed and, mindful of the words of the holy man I began to say, "Holy God." At once I was so greatly moved to tears and loving desire for God that I would be unable to describe in words the joy and delight I then felt. I fell prostrate on the ground, and at once I saw, and behold, a great light was immaterially shining on me and seized hold of my whole mind and soul, so that I was struck with amazement at the unexpected marvel and I was, as it were, in ecstasy. Moreover I forgot the place where I stood, who I was, and where, and could only cry out, "Lord, have mercy,"...I conversed with this Light...It expelled from me all material denseness and bodily heaviness that made my members to be sluggish and numb. What an awesome marvel!

St. Simeon's experience of God's Presence, as he describes it, astonishingly mimics the experience of the saints throughout all ages. It transcends place, person, and time. Although made manifest only to a few, God's Presence surrounds us daily in the chapel. Only the scales on our eyes, due to our sinfulness, presumption, and familiarity—and God's protection—prevent us from experiencing it. As we draw near to the Holy, whether immaterial or material, let us recollect where we are, what we do, and how we minister.

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