

THE INVASION OF

sacred space



BY ELECTRONIC DEVICES

GETTY IMAGES

Dear Father Kerper: While attending an ordination Mass, I started recording it with my cell phone. A priest approached me and told me to stop because I didn't have permission. I apologized and put my phone away. Recently, I was at church with a friend who began recording the Pentecost Mass with his cell phone. He especially wanted to record the consecration. I politely asked him to put the phone away. After Mass, he became furious with me for interfering. He defended himself by saying that Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) and many parishes live stream Masses and that he was doing the same thing. Was I right to raise this with him?

Yes! And Pope Francis "has your back" on this one.

Last November in Rome, the Holy Father spoke forcefully against the invasion of sacred space by electronic devices. He said:

"The Mass is not a show, but a beautiful, transformative encounter with the true loving presence of Christ. That is why people need to focus their hearts on God, not focus on their smartphones for pictures during Mass. When the priest celebrating Mass says, 'Let us lift up our hearts,' he is not saying, 'Lift up our cellphones and take a picture.' No. It's an awful thing to do. It makes me so sad when I celebrate (Mass) in the square or in the basilica and I see so many cellphones in the air. And not just by the lay faithful, but by some priests and bishops, too."

Pope Francis has touched upon the crucial spiritual danger posed by smart phones and other electronic devices: They actually *separate* their users from *an encounter with God in the present moment*. This has tragic consequences, especially the withdrawal of videographers and photographers from the common prayer of gathered Catholics. To paraphrase the Lord: "One cannot serve two masters in church, God and technology."

At baptisms, for example, people who roam about recording the event *cannot* possibly pray or reflect on the mystery of the moment. Instead they withdraw themselves entirely from the astounding event — the insertion of the child into the Body of Christ — in order to "document" the baptism for the future.

This hyper-documentation of the liturgy betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the sacred, even among devout Catholics: namely, the overemphasis of the external at the expense of the interior.

You mentioned, for example, that your friend wanted to photograph the consecration of the Eucharist and, I assume, the elevation of the sacred Host. However, this "freezing" of the Blessed Sacrament as a photograph or tiny piece of digital video reduces him to an "It," a material object cut off from the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit who brings about the consecration.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said to the apostles, "Do this in memory of me." The word "this" refers to the whole "eucharistic event" — the gathering of the participants, the thanksgiving to God the Father, the transformation of bread and wine into the Lord's body and blood, and the partaking of the eucharistic elements by the apostles. This stream of events, all of them deeply mystical and therefore "hidden," can never be accurately reproduced by images whether through digital devices or even by the brush strokes of Leonardo DaVinci.

Sad to say, many Catholics have succumbed to a prevailing feature of secular culture: the addictive impulse to dominate and "hyper-personalize" every inch of material reality, including the realm of God,

through digital technology.

In effect, the wall between sacred and profane crumbles, and everything receives the same treatment: the celebration of a baptism no longer differs from a soccer game and the Blessed Sacrament becomes just another curious religious artifact stored on one's cell phone or posted on Facebook.

This "hyper-personalization" happens in two ways. First, every photo of a gigantic event, say, a papal Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, becomes "my unique way of seeing the Pope." The lens of the digital device transforms the memory of a spectacular communal event of the universal Church into "the Pope and me." The individual flies away from the community and dwells in his or her little niche.

Second, the very act of harvesting digital images from sacred events necessarily involves some disruption of the praying community. This happens when people move about the church, erect cameras and lights, and even enter the sanctuary for close ups of specific people. They may unintentionally desecrate the entire liturgy in pursuit of that one perfect photo.

Your friend defended himself by citing the live streaming of Masses by EWTN and some Catholic parishes. These Masses, however, differ radically from what your friend was doing.

First, they are usually electronic transmissions of *live* Masses, not stored memories. Second, they enable people to participate remotely in that day's eucharistic celebration. And third, those who produce the televised Masses do so discreetly without disrupting worship.

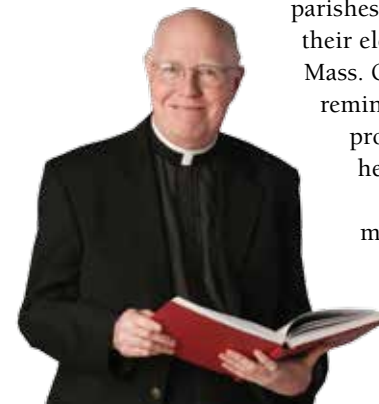
As to speaking to your friend, you did the right thing, acting prudently and politely.

For sure, not every offense merits correction, but when people disrupt the prayerful worship of others, whether nearby or throughout the church, they deserve a charitable challenge. After all, people who come to church to pray, celebrate baptisms, the Eucharist and other sacred actions have a right to a setting that is quiet, peaceful and unpolluted by noise and flashing lights.

Prevention works better than confrontation. For example, some parishes ask people to shut off their electronic devices before Mass. Others post polite reminders in bulletins and programs. This often helps.

Thank you raising this matter. You certainly have the right instincts about reverence.

For sure, other worshippers — and Pope Francis! — will applaud your intervention. ■



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.



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