

- When Jesus died on the cross, Scripture records that, among other incredible phenomena like an earthquake and the splitting of rocks, the veil in the Jewish Temple was torn in two.
- This is incredible because that veil was a 60 foot tall, 4 inch thick piece of material that hung as a barrier between the Holy of Holies, which was the dwelling place of God, and the rest of the Temple: the domain of man.
- The veil was meant not only to demarcate the holiest place of the Temple, but also, in a sense, to symbolically demonstrate the utter separateness between God and man, i.e., that because of his sinfulness, man is unfit for the presence of God.
- In this way the veil served as a powerful reminder to the Jews of the necessity of repentance in the face of God's almighty power and glory.
- Recognizing the separation between God and man, we often speak symbolically of there being a veil between heaven and earth, and that when one dies, one passes beyond this veil separating God and man.
- But occasionally in the course of human history, that veil separating God and man has been pulled back, revealing a glimpse of God's glory! The miraculous events of the Old Testament such as the parting of the Red Sea and the giving of the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai are both such moments.
- And of course there were many other such moments during the life of Jesus: His miracles, His Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, and most especially the Christmas mysteries of His Incarnation, the Epiphany, and today's feast of the Baptism of the Lord.
- But each of these events is not simply a manifestation of our Lord's glory. Each of these events is a manifestation of God's deep love for humanity. And it is in this context that we must understand the feast that we celebrate today.
- You see, on our own, we can do nothing to bridge the infinite gap that exists between God and man. Only God can bridge that gap, and therefore, we must patiently wait upon our Lord to come and draw us to Himself.
- And that is the beauty of the Christmas mysteries! For in the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord, we see our Lord coming to us – even becoming one of us – to save us from our sins so that we can be united with Him for all eternity.
- In the Jewish Temple the veil was also a reminder of the utter mysteriousness of God and the fact that while we live on earth, we will never fully understand the Lord. Thus, the veil helped increase the Jews' love, respect, and longing for the Lord.
- So that we might also increase our love, respect, and longing for our Lord, this understanding of the separateness of God and man has been carried into our Catholic liturgy and even into our architecture. In other words, a remnant of the Temple veil remains, if you will.
- In our Catholic architectural tradition, the sanctuary – our own Holy of Holies – is always demarcated from the rest of the church. Historically this has been accomplished through the use of an altar rail, for this space is where God dwells, and it should be set apart.
- Not only does the rail remind us of the separation that exists between God and man because of our sinfulness, it is also our invitation to humble ourselves before the Lord as we approach Him.
- While the Book of Hebrews encourages us to approach God's throne confidently in order to receive His mercy, our confidence must be tempered with a humble acknowledgement of our sinfulness. The altar rail reminds us of this.

- But the altar rail is not the only remnant of the Temple veil in our liturgy. Oftentimes the tabernacles in our churches have veils either over them or inside the doors to help effect this important symbolism.
- We also use a veil over the chalice and paten, and we do not unveil them until it is time for God to be manifested in the Eucharist.
- During the last two weeks of Lent, we place veils over our statues in order to visually fast from the images of the saints so that we can concentrate on the essential elements of Christ's work of redemption. This veiling helps to clear away distractions so that we might focus on Jesus who calls us through the cross to a life of holiness.
- Another liturgical veil is the use of Latin. We use Latin in our liturgy not simply because it's our mother tongue as Catholics, but also because it acts as a linguistic shroud that veils the redemptive mysteries of our faith.
- When we don't understand the words of a prayer or a song because it is in Latin, it is our reminder that during our earthly lives God is ineffable. And this lack of understanding is our call to humbly recognize our finitude in the face of His infinitude.
- And perhaps the most important veil in our liturgy is the bread and wine with which Christ veils His body and blood. Just as Jesus veiled His divinity with human flesh when He was born of the Virgin Mary, so too does He veil Himself with bread and wine in the Eucharist.
- The point of all this veiling is that while we do experience real union with God here on earth, especially through the sacraments, we will not fully experience His glory until we get to heaven. Our sinfulness still gets in the way, and thus some separation necessarily remains.
- And so God's full divinity remains veiled as a means of enticing us, of making us yearn for Him ever more deeply, for there is always something alluring about that which cannot be seen, about the unknown.
- Thus, the veils we use at Mass poignantly remind us of the utter separation that exists between God and man, and thereby they remind us as well of the greatness of God's love in bridging that gap despite our sinfulness.
- These veils act as markers that point out deeper spiritual realities and invite us to enter more deeply into the mysteries of our faith.
- Lastly, they call us to the humble recognition that we are limited and finite creatures, sinful and imperfect, and therefore we are in desperate need of God's mercy.
- Today, my friends, in the Baptism of the Lord, the veil separating heaven and earth is pulled back, and our Lord's glory is revealed to us once again. The mystery of our God-made-man is given fuller expression as He is baptized in the Jordan.
- Yet in coming to us as a tiny child at Christmas and in being baptized in the Jordan, Jesus reveals not only that God has become man. He shows us how man can become like God.
- For when we allow ourselves to be plunged into these life-saving waters safeguarded by Holy Mother Church, God Himself enters into our souls: cleansing us of sin; filling us with faith, hope and charity; and transforming us into an image of Himself.
- In the gift of baptism, we are made one with the Lord. In this simple sacrament our Lord leaps down from Heaven into our souls in order to make a home within us. In His unfathomable mercy, God bridges that gap we created by our sinfulness through baptism.
- As this Christmas season comes to a close, let us renew our desire for true union with God by veiling ourselves in holiness. Recognizing our sinfulness, let us humble ourselves in His presence, trusting that He will bridge the gap that exists between us and Him.