

Understanding Episcopal Liturgy

#11. What is the reason the priest and other people bow as they approach the altar?

The Hebrew scriptures warn God's people not to worship idols and other physical objects. So when we bow in front of the altar we are definitely not worshipping the altar or the cross behind the altar. We are showing reverence for the consecrated bread and wine which are kept on the shelf next to the altar.

This is connected with a particular type of prayer, called an 'invocation', which is said as part of the Eucharistic Prayer. For example, in Eucharistic Prayer C, the priest holds their hands near the bread and the wine and says, "Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord." We understand that the bread and the wine have been made holy in some way, through the prayers and actions of our Eucharistic celebration.

At the end of each worship service, we gather what remains of the consecrated bread and wine and keep them in special containers on a shelf next to the altar. The priest and other worship leaders bow as they approach the altar in an action of reverence for the consecrated bread and wine. This is also the reason some of our members make a small bow, or genuflect, before taking a seat in their pew at the beginning of worship.