

# Surfeit of meaning: Sacred symbolism

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

Durandus? Who's that? I had never heard of him until someone lowered *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* onto my lap during a recent trip to Louisville. Seldom will one find a more engrossing book on sacred symbolism than this effort by Guilielmus Durandus (1230-1296) to instruct clergy and others on the meanings of liturgy, Christian art and medieval ways of life.

Globbered together in the book are translations from 1842, 1854 and 1899 of various parts of the *Rationale* and of some parallel books, all charming in their archaism. Fons Vitae director Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore ([www.fonsvitae.com](http://www.fonsvitae.com)) enriched the book with topical photographs. Durandus found scripturally based significance in door handles, girdles and other churchly artifacts. Someone accused him of finding meaning "in everything he saw," but that's less of a fault than finding no meaning in anything and still writing, which happens often today.

I learned that the separate seating of men and women in church was a custom of the ancients. The men were to sit on the southern side to signify that "the saints who be most advanced in holiness should stand against the greater temptations of the world" (which this stronger sex would do).

Details about objects: "The snuffers or scissors for trimming the lamps are the divine words by which men amputate the legal titles of the law, and reveal the shining spirit," while "the vessels in which the wicks, when snuffed, are extinguished, are the hearts of the faithful." (Durandus tells why ostrich eggs are suspended in churches, but it would take too long for me to summarize.)

As for vestments: Since "weariness . . . often creepeth upon minds well disposed" when divine worship goes on too long, the priest uses the maniple or sudarium "to wipe away the sweats of his mind and shake off his heart's heaviness."

Flip-flop lovers will note that the priest's sandals "being open in certain places and closed in others, signify that the preaching of the Gospel ought neither to be revealed unto all, nor hid from all." And how should priests style their hair? "Now the combe with its symmetrical teeth functions to arrange the hair in order, and as such indicates the quality of discretion which should serve to adorne the interior of the soul." We baldies are about the only phenomenon Durandus forgot to mention.

"Now we will speak of cemeteries." Durandus says that *cemetery* gets its name from *cimen*, which means "sweet," and *sterion*, which is a "station"—"Or because there be therein *cimices*, that is reptiles of an intolerable odour." Both etymologies are wrong, but are more tantalizing than the real reason for cemeteries. Men had been buried in their own houses, says Durandus, but because of "the stench thereby engendered," it was decreed that bodies be set aside in sanctified places.

Here's one relevant for congregations and denominations in which members fight in worship wars or over homosexuality: "If anyone having been wounded in a church dieth without, or even if blood flow from the wound away from the church the building can be reconciled." And: "If anyone slain without the church, be shortly borne into the church, and there the murderer . . . inflict on his yet warm body a blow causing blood to flow, then the church must be reconciled." If someone is "dismembered in the church or disemboweled," one part of his body may be buried in one place, and another in another.

Most of the book, I hasten to add, is about life, and I found meaning and meanings in it, though not as many as Durandus offered.