

Good gaffe: Blush-worthy moments

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

Is there a Greek word for “embarrassment”? My English biblical concordances have no entry for it. “Shame,” carrying as it does the connotations of guilt, has scores of listings. Embarrassment has none.

I’ve thought a lot about embarrassment after reading reports about poor Edwin Gallart, who, trying to retrieve his cell phone, got his arm stuck in a toilet in a New York Metro-North train. The efforts it took to extricate him cost the Metro system thousands of dollars. Gallart cut his arm and may get sued, but worst of all, he was embarrassed. Reflection: the inconvenience and expense aside, Gallart has no reason to feel guilty. He performed a public service by helping all the rest of us feel superior.

We all have our own embarrassments. I will illustrate with some pastoral ones. The first may be an urban legend, but numbers of putative observers report that it did happen. While listening to the liturgy in a seminary chapel, a nervous ordinand absent-mindedly traced the perforated vine-and-branches carving on a prie-dieu with his finger. It got stuck. When the efforts of the clerics to release him were unsuccessful, four stout liturgists carried the prie-dieu to the vestry—with him attached, wincing. But what a grace! All of us whose ordinations proceeded uneventfully can feel superior as we chuckle.

One of mine: Easter morning, sharing the sanctuary with another rookie almost 50 years ago, I brought the posteucharistic liturgy toward a close. As the congregation sang “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” I heard my colleague repeatedly sing “Marty, you forgot the choir anthem today!” Assuming my gaffe would be least noticeable if I simply had the choir sing its song while the congregation still stood, I announced that we would now hear the anthem—which turned out to be a long-rehearsed mini-oratorio. Congregants still remind me of that gaffe.

Or: as a tyro assistant pastor making the rounds of the ill, I made my biweekly stop at the home of a bedfast young woman who was recuperating from kidney treatment. Her mother cared for her. I was whisked into the bedroom, shared the

sacrament and was ready to go, when the mother walked back in: "Pastor, do you have time for tea today?" I did. Years later I learned that through it all the sick woman was lying on a bedpan. She'd not had time to remove it before I was ushered in and was too embarrassed to ask me to step out and her mother to step in to help. I still blush when I hear that story.

Doing a round of "practice sermons" which, I hope, were bearers of the gospel but were also opportunities for me to get experience and bring home the needed \$35-a-week stipend, I got to learn the chancel architecture of northwest Iowa small-town churches. At one, I did not realize that at a certain point in the communion liturgy two ushers would drop a section of the communion rail, as it was called, and lock it into place. Not positioned right, I turned to see my means of access to the congregation blocked. I looked around and found that the only door opened on a closet. What we called "Holy Communion" was interrupted by some unholy laughter that day. The event was redeemed after church by the many generous expressions of empathy.

After 50 years I am still embarrassed by these gaffes. To everyone who saw or heard about these blush-worthy moments I, like Mr. Gallart, spread the happiness of feeling superior.