

Japanese Customs

By the time you read this Bulletin column, I'll be aboard the Holland-America ship, *Westerdam*, serving as the ship's Chaplain. We'll be cruising around the islands of Japan with a stop in South Korea. I've been to Japan on a couple of previous trips, but this will be the most comprehensive excursion yet.

I've never yet visited Hiroshima or Kyoto, and so these are high on my list of shore excursions. However, I am more interested in the Japanese culture and people than in any particular place. The respect Japanese people show each other is more than etiquette. Once when I was waiting to board a Japanese train, I saw the guard on the platform bowing to the locomotive engineer as the train pulled into the station. To me, the bow denoted an appreciation for each person's role in making their society work smoothly.

Westerners have their own social conventions that accomplish the same purpose. The "Have a nice day!" we receive after our groceries are checked out is not a hollow gesture; it's a signal that our interaction is complete and we can move on. Shaking hands was discouraged during the pandemic to avoid spreading the virus. Yet allowing another person into our personal space is a sign that we trust them and can interact with them at a deeper level than as a complete stranger.

I'm not saying that Japanese social conventions are superior to ours, but by contrasting one culture to another we can learn from others and gain a new appreciation for our own social conventions. Perhaps some of the formal reserve Japanese people show to each other can remind us brash Westerners to give each other a little space and lower the tensions we can create around us.

By the way: you may notice that at the Kiss of Peace that I bow to you with my hands clasped in the prayer position. It may look like something ingrained in me by my mother at an early age, or that I picked up in the seminary. In fact, I adopted it from those Buddhists bowing to each other on the railway platform in Japan. I still encourage whatever gesture you may choose—including shaking hands or embracing. As the presider, the bow lets me acknowledge your prayerful presence and allows us to move on to the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God").

