

The Mass: Being a Part, Not Being Apart

I was recently reminded of an incident that happened many years ago involving a priest now deceased but who had better remain unnamed. About to begin Sunday morning Mass, he noticed a number of people standing at the back of church so he asked them to find a seat in the congregation with everyone else. Most did but one or two remained where they were, so he asked again saying that the Mass would not continue until everyone was seated. All but one found a seat. So he then left the altar and walked down to the back of church and told the remaining person that he could either find a seat or leave. He left and never came back again.

As a youngster I remember another incident in my home parish church. A number of people had come in after Mass had started and from the altar the priest actually asked them to leave and come back for a later Mass when they could be on time.

While we can't really argue against the principles behind both incidents (that wherever possible we should be in time for Mass and that we are meant to be a part of the single worshipping community and not keeping ourselves apart unless we are unwell for example), understandably we wouldn't really agree with the way either priest handled those situations. By the same token, fifty years ago things were somewhat different and I think people would have been less shocked by either of those incidents than would be the case today.

In one of the video presentations that we have been using recently in the parish, from my point of view as a priest it was interesting to hear parents talking about how difficult it can be to get a young family ready and out to Mass on time and also to try to arrive with some degree of peace of mind still in tact after having to referee squabbles and arguments between siblings on the way. Those parents also spoke about how difficult it can be to focus on the celebration, or even to experience the graces it is meant to bring, when trying to keep young children under control and as quiet as possible can be so demanding and distracting.

And talking of distractions, something else I was thinking about had to do with people who find themselves easily distracted during Mass and their minds wandering all over the place other than being focused on what is happening at the altar. They do, of course, appreciate that the Mass is the single greatest miracle they have the privilege to witness and take part in and yet their minds are so often elsewhere. How can they stop that happening they ask.

Let me repeat what I just said, that the Mass is the single greatest miracle we have the privilege to witness *and take part in* – and that's the important thing, that the Mass requires our active participation, and yet that is precisely what we so often struggle with for all sorts of reasons.

The Bishops' Conference document *Celebrating the Mass* says:

Responsibility for the quality of Catholic liturgical life does not lie with priests alone. The fullness of all that the Eucharist can be implies the wholehearted engagement of everyone involved.

It goes on to talk about “active participation”, “the participation of all”, that parish priests should “promote the full and active participation of all the people”, and says that everyone present at Mass “should contribute to the participation of all and show the Church as the body of Christ, actively engaged in worship of the living God”.

At this point it would be understandable if you are wondering just *how* the people at Mass are supposed to actively participate. Isn't that the role of those directly involved in the celebration? Well yes, but it isn't just *their* role because in a very real way we are *all* directly involved. This can be a difficult concept to grasp and we have recent history to thank for that.

Forty-plus years ago it was accepted that all we had to do was go to Mass, just be there and do little more than join in the (Latin) responses. We used to talk about “hearing” Mass. We were merely spectators – we shouldn't have been but more often than not that's all we were. It was like going to the pictures. You pay your money, you go in, you sit and watch for a couple of hours (you may even nod off for a while) and then you come out and go home. You might have slightly different expectations if you go to a play or a concert because at least you get to laugh and clap from time to time – which gives you something to do and keeps you awake. If you go a football match you are, again, a spectator but there is much more opportunity for participation, emotional participation, shouting and cheering (or jeering) as the fortunes of your team ebb and flow. At least you feel like you've been involved – and at £500 or more for a season ticket, so you should!

We never should have been just spectators at Mass, an audience that never even got to clap or laugh or cheer. The Mass is a communal meal, a communal celebration, it's about all of us being there together, gathered around the altar just as the disciples were gathered around the table with Our Lord at the Last Supper. They didn't just sit there as passive spectators waiting for Jesus to feed them; it was a communal meal which they shared together, took part in together, served, poured, passed things and cleared things away.

Yes, the priest has a particular role at Mass just as Christ did at that meal and, yes, so do the servers and ministers who assist him and contribute to the celebration in a very direct and obvious way. But it's not just their celebration – they aren't actors on a stage for everyone else to sit and watch and listen to (though there is much watching and listening to be done). No, it is everyone's celebration, “the body of Christ, actively engaged in worship of the living God” as the Bishops said. But how do we participate, how can we be actively engaged, actively involved?

As I have just said, there is much watching and listening to do. If we went to a film or a play wearing a blindfold and ear-plugs, it would be a total waste of time. We go to listen, to watch and to be entertained. So too with the Mass and, yes, there is an element of being entertained at Mass but don't expect the priest to come out dressed

as a clown and tell jokes. The “entertainment”, the thing that should grab our attention and hold us spellbound, is the very fact that Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour is going to become really and truly present on the altar in front of our very eyes under the appearance of bread and wine. If that doesn’t impress then I don’t know what will. Also in the Mass God himself speaks to us through his word in scripture. We’d be impressed if some celebrity was going to speak to us; in this case it’s Almighty God through his prophets, through his apostles, through his Son. Jesus has “the message of eternal life” St Peter rightly said. Are we impressed enough to be there on time to hear what he has to say to us? It’s important and maybe, as that priest suggested, if we miss it we should come back to a later Mass when we can be there for the entire celebration.

Throughout the Mass we are physically involved through various actions and postures. Catholics are probably the most active of congregations because we stand, we sit, we kneel, depending on what is going on at the altar and we should think about why we are sitting or kneeling or standing: what is going on at that particular point in the Mass that makes that posture appropriate? We “cross” ourselves at the start and end of Mass, we sign our forehead, lips and heart at the gospel, we exchange a sign of peace before communion. Why? What do these actions mean? How do they relate to what is happening? Our actions shouldn’t be just a matter of habit.¹

There is also the whole aspect of taking in, and engaging with, the setting of the Mass – the liturgical colour, the decoration, the signs and symbols in the sanctuary, the music that accompanies it, all the things that are part of, and contribute to, that particular celebration. There is a real danger in taking things for granted, of not being observant, of assuming that everything is just the same as it was last week. The theme will be different²; the prayers of the Mass will be different; the readings will be different, the hymns will be different; and of course, *we* will be different. We come with different concerns, different needs, at the end of a week that has been different, and so what we bring to that celebration will be different and what we hope to gain from it will be different. In that respect the congregation will also be different even if the faces are the same.

Above all we meet around the altar as members of God’s family. Just as you, as a parent, may have struggled to get your children up and out and to the church, so perhaps has God our Father struggled to get us up and out and to church (and on time). Just as you may find yourself struggling during Mass to keep your kids quiet and occupied and stop them fighting each other and distracting others, so God our Father may be having a tough time with us *his* children, asking us to be prayerfully quiet, trying to keep our attention, whispering in our ear when he knows we are being

¹ The speaker in the video presentation that I mentioned earlier gave two examples of this: of Catholics leaving their seat at the pictures and, out of habit, genuflecting to the screen(!), or of getting on a bus, “dipping” their hand in the used ticket bin and making the sign of the cross!

² Which is why it is sad when the priest has introduced the theme and perhaps explained particular aspect of that day’s celebration, and then people come rolling in late and have missed all of that and probably think it doesn’t matter - and yet it does.

critical and judgmental of who and what we see around us, preparing us through word and action for the miracle he is about to perform for us on the altar.

Priests don't always get it right in their efforts to help the people to grow in their knowledge and experience of what the Mass is all about, but we do try and we do have to persist in that effort because the eucharist, as the catechism says, is the source and summit of our Christian life. It is too vital, too important, to our worshipping community and to the spiritual well-being of the body of Christ to settle for anything less. Indeed the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says:

The Bishop should therefore be determined that the priests, the deacons, and the lay Christian faithful grasp ever more deeply the genuine meaning of the rites and liturgical texts, and thereby be led to an active and fruitful celebration of the Eucharist.

A final quote from that same document summarises what we have been saying (I have added the italics):

The celebration of Mass, as *the action of Christ and the People of God*... is the centre of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the Father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit.

It is therefore of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass – that is, the Lord's Supper – be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful *taking part in it*... may derive from it more abundantly those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood and entrusted it to the Church as a memorial of his Passion and Resurrection.

This will best be accomplished if, with due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a *conscious, active and full participation of the faithful both in body and mind*, a participation burning with faith, hope and charity, *of the sort which is desired by the Church and demanded by the very nature of the celebration*, and to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism.

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas