

## “Late Have I Loved You”

Speaking of his newly discovered faith in Jesus Christ, it was St Augustine who wrote: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you!” It would indeed be wonderful for someone to come to love of God late, but the same can’t be said about coming to Mass late.

Yes, I’m on my soapbox again but I make no apologies for it because what I’m taking about – our celebration of the eucharist – is, as the catechism teaches ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’ (para 1324). In its document *Celebrating the Mass*, the Bishops’ Conference urges us ‘to deepen our understanding of why we celebrate Mass as we do (because) deepening our understanding of why we do something is often of great assistance to us as we seek to do things well’ (para 9). The bishops then go on to speak of the necessity for all of us to be open to ongoing liturgical catechesis because ‘in these changing times it is not only children who need to be educated into a mature understanding of the liturgy’ (para 13).

A constant starting point for those of us who are “of a certain age” is the quite extraordinary practice – and it may never have been an actual Church teaching – that as long as we were in church before the ‘Sanctus’ we had “heard Mass”, as we used to say, and in those days that could be at least half an hour into the Mass. It was indeed a bizarre concept that it didn’t matter if we had missed the word of God addressed to us in scripture, as long as we were there for (what we today call) the Liturgy of the Eucharist and communion, that was good enough. How could we have ever thought such minimal attendance at what was, and is, “the source and summit” of our faith life was acceptable, and acceptable to God?

As a further illustration of the approach to Mass back then, on All Souls Day priests were permitted to celebrate three Masses and, on the apparent principle that if one Mass was good three must be better, they would celebrate them one straight after the other! And the accepted practice was that if you came into church at a particular point in one of those Masses, you could stay to that same point in the Mass that followed and it counted as having heard a complete Mass! It was a bit like (again in the old days) missing part of the main feature at the cinema and sitting through the ‘B’ film and the “shorts” and watching the main film again until you came to the part where you came in. That might work with films but it should never have been acceptable when it came to the Mass.

Having said all of that, we knew – this time from Church teaching – that if we deliberately missed Mass on Sunday it was (and still is) a mortal sin and so if we arrived after that “cut-off point” in the Mass we hadn’t heard Mass. If it was possible we would therefore have to come back for the next Mass. That’s how it

was, that was our understanding as to the legality of whether we had heard Mass or not and we were very clear on the subject. What happened, therefore, that it now seems not to matter whether we are late or not?

**T**he Church teaches quite categorically that we can no longer see our celebration of Mass as just a matter of receiving communion. The catechism says that the Mass ‘unfolds according to a fundamental structure which has been preserved throughout the centuries down to our own day. It displays two great parts that form a fundamental unity...the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist (which) together form one single act of worship’ (para 1346). It would seem, therefore, that it may not have been officially acceptable after all to arrive in time for the consecration and still be able to say that we had heard Mass – we had missed one of the ‘two great parts that form a fundamental unity of worship’.

**I** rather suspect (and this is only a personal reflection) that at a time when Mass was celebrated in a foreign language (Latin) by a priest with his back to the people, that it didn’t seem to matter when we arrived or left because our participation in the Mass was so minimal anyway. The simple fact of our physically being there, and quite literally just “hearing” Mass was good enough. The Church now quite rightly stresses the importance of our full *participation* in the Mass, and that simply being there as a spectator is no longer acceptable because that’s not what the Mass is about. ‘All have their own active parts to play in the celebration each in their own way’ (para 1348). It’s a point reinforced by the Bishops’ Conference when it says ‘the Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy’ (para 24).

**C**rucial to full participation is our being there in the first place – and being there in time, not just for the start of Mass (as important as that is) but having the time to disengage from the outside world, place ourselves in the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and prepare ourselves properly, spiritually, for the celebration in which we are about to take part. If we arrive too late to do that, then we haven’t really given ourselves the opportunity to prepare as we should. Similarly if we have missed the penitential rite then we are not spiritually prepared for the celebration. If we have missed the priest’s introduction to the theme of the celebration then we have missed information important to why we are there - and it *is* important. I find it very frustrating as a priest to spend that time (as the Church asks us to) explaining, for example, the life of the saint whose memorial it may be, or briefly outlining the theme of the readings, only to have someone arrive late having missed all of that but apparently feeling that it doesn’t matter.

**I**f we have missed any, or all, of the Liturgy of the Word, then we have not only missed God’s word addressed to us, but we have also missed one of the ‘two great

parts that form a fundamental unity of worship’ and therefore we really haven’t “heard Mass” (again, as we used to say). The Church teaches that the Liturgy of the Word, as a part of that fundamental unity of worship, is no more or no less important than the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We can’t content ourselves with arriving late for Mass on the grounds that at least we were there for communion. ‘These two principal parts of the Mass are so closely connected as to form one single act of worship’ (*The Celebration of Mass*, para 20).

No one is trying to drive people away from Mass or say that they can’t come in because they are late.<sup>1</sup> What is being said is that if we fully appreciate the centrality and importance of what it is we are celebrating at Mass then we should *want* to be there for the whole celebration, unavoidable one-off situations notwithstanding, of course. If we are late then we need to ask ourselves: was it completely unavoidable or is it happening quite often? Do I perhaps need to reorganise my schedule so as to make the sort of time I need for whatever other demands are going to be made on me before I head out to church or for the traffic I’m likely to encounter on the way? Do I need to take an earlier bus or could I ask a parishioner with a car to give me a lift to church? Is it actually quite possible for me to be at church in good time because of how important the entire celebration - from the opening Sign of the Cross to the Final Blessing - should be to me?

One further, and to me somewhat telling, point is the fact that we wouldn’t be late for a film because we wouldn’t want to miss any of the story; we wouldn’t be late for a football match in case we missed a goal; we know it would be discourteous to be late for a play or a classical concert because getting to our seat would cause a disturbance; and being late for a dinner invitation would be considered bad manners.<sup>2</sup> Films or matches or concerts don’t even begin to rate with the celebration of Mass - it’s the singular most important thing that we can do, and will do, in our day - and yet people will arrive late for Mass. Seemingly it doesn’t matter if they have missed anything – even the word of God - and God isn’t supposed to mind that they are late for his invitation. How do they rationalise these things?

Let’s just turn the situation around...let’s say that everyone was there for the start of Mass but were kept waiting, perhaps five maybe even ten minutes, before the priest processed out for the start of Mass, and let’s say this happened quite

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<sup>1</sup> In the absence of a Catholic youth centre, as a teenager I used to attend a Presbyterian youth club along with my friends and, in an early and unofficial effort at ecumenism, used to occasionally attend their evening service (having already been to Mass, I hasten to add!). I always remember that their practice was to close (and possibly lock) the doors as soon as the service began and no one got in late (or left early) until the service was ended. It worked.

<sup>2</sup> The Danish comedian Victor Borge used to include a routine in his American concerts, one that was set up beforehand but which he used in order to make a point. A person comes in late and is picking his way along a row of seats. Borge stops his act and asks the person, “Where have you come from that you are late? I’ve come all the way from Copenhagen and I was here on time!”

often...what would the people's reaction be? I don't think it would be very positive and quite rightly so. Why should they be kept waiting every week when Mass is scheduled to start at a specific time? And what does the priest have to do that is so important that he can't be there on time, properly prepared? Or let's say that the priest decided to skip the Liturgy of the Word and went straight to the tabernacle and distributed holy communion. Do you think the people would feel there was something missing and that they hadn't really been to Mass that day (which, of course, they wouldn't have been – not to Mass - in such circumstances)?

**I**f we were invited to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen, and all the more so if we were invited to dine with her, just imagine all the protocol that we would have to be aware of: how to dress, how to conduct ourselves, the things we can do and not do, and how to address the Queen if she happened to speak to us. And, of course, we would be given a time to arrive by after which we wouldn't be allowed in. If that is how things - admittedly temporal things - are in our approach to the Queen, how should things be in our practical and spiritual approach to God and his invitation to the eucharist? The problem is that most of us would never expect to get an invitation to Buckingham Palace even once in our lifetime - which is why it would be such a major event if it ever happened - whereas we get an invitation to meet God in the eucharist *every* day. Surely familiarity hasn't bred...well not contempt I'm sure, but is there perhaps a danger of taking the Mass, and even the Blessed Sacrament, for granted? Surely we don't need a reminder of God's almighty and glorious presence as recorded in Ezekiel<sup>3</sup> and Revelations<sup>4</sup> emanating from the tabernacle to get our attention? But when you see people come into church - God's house - and immediately start chatting with people, and they still haven't even acknowledged the real presence of Almighty God in the tabernacle and said a few words to him, you have to wonder. It's at *his* invitation that we are there in the first place and as Jesus teaches in the gospel (Mt 22 v 1-14) we should never take that invitation for granted.

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<sup>3</sup> All of Ch 1

<sup>4</sup> Ch 1 v 12-18 and Ch 4 v 1-5