

“The Times They Are A-Changing”

We have two churches in the parish, one in the centre of this busy seaside town, and the other some four miles away serving a once independent rural community which is now part of the amalgamated parish. On a weekend we have three Masses, a Saturday evening Vigil Mass in town and two Sunday morning Masses one in each church. Being a seaside town, the attendance at “Sunday” Mass (which includes the Saturday Vigil of course) increases considerably in the summer months with all of the visitors who join us, but even then the church in town (which can seat about 300)(the other church can seat about 90) is never anywhere near full. Out of season, attendance at the three Masses averages around 50, 200 and 40+ respectively.

Faced with a gradual decline in the number of people attending our Saturday Vigil, the future of that Mass was discussed at a recent deanery meeting. My proposal was that it be discontinued during the winter months when numbers attending Sunday Mass could easily be accommodated at the two Sunday morning celebrations and a time of year when the elderly in particular tend to express concern about venturing out on dark nights. However, the general feeling was that it should continue if only because there is no other Vigil Mass in the area, and also because some may stop coming to Mass altogether if “their” Mass were to be discontinued (even just for the winter months).

I didn’t quite understand the logic of that argument to be honest. Vigil Masses in neighbouring parishes were stopped because, presumably, circumstances changed and they were no longer justified or supported, but ours has to continue (even though in the winter months the same would be true) simply because no other local parish has one! And if the Eucharist is as important to someone as it should be, it seems unlikely they would stop going to Mass just because of a change in schedule - but if they do then that is a decision between themselves and God that they would have to make, and be responsible for, in conscience.

I can remember when Vigil Masses were first introduced and the reason was to do with shift patterns and people not being able to get to Sunday morning Mass - and yet they had always managed before there were Vigil Masses, mainly because many parishes had a Sunday evening Mass. All it seemed to do was confuse even further the concept of the Sabbath at a time when Sundays were beginning to lose their special character anyway. If people went to the Saturday Vigil, did they still remember to keep the Sabbath (a period of 24hrs which, strictly speaking, began with their celebration of Mass)? Or, with their so-called “Mass obligation” taken care of on Saturday evening, was there a danger that Sunday simply became a day off and the other requirements of the

Sabbath (as established by God's commandment and the precepts of the Church) were forgotten?

Many of us can remember a time when there were several Sunday Masses in most parishes and, as a result, we came to consider that as the norm – which, in purely practical terms, it probably was. There were a lot more people going to Mass and filling our churches back then and a lot more priests available to celebrate all those Masses. In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable decline in Mass attendance and in the number of priests and of vocations. Those two facts make some degree of change inevitable in terms of how many Sunday Masses *can* be celebrated. At the same time the Church has raised the question of how many Masses *should* be celebrated.

Given that the question was first raised by the Vatican Council over forty years ago, why does it still come as such a shock to people? The Council very clearly stated (in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, para 106) that: “On the Lord’s day...Christ’s faithful should come together into one place” and this is echoed in the document *Celebrating the Mass*, published by the Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales, which states that the Mass “should be in every sense inclusive and not be needlessly multiplied” – the emphasis being on the word “needlessly”. “Although more than one Mass will often be celebrated in a parish on a Sunday” the Bishops said, “a balance needs to be kept between what is convenient, and what helps the Church to become an authentic community of faith.” In other words, the Mass is meant to be a communal celebration of the whole parish family together and the only justification for there being more than one Sunday Mass in a parish would be the fact that the church is too small to accommodate everyone at a single celebration, or, perhaps, that there is more than one church in the parish.

This reminder from the Church that the ideal is for the parish to gather for a single celebration, a celebration of unity and *community*, also reminds us that the Mass is never “mine”. We may use that word, perhaps without really thinking about it, to refer to the particular Mass time we have become used to attending, but it isn’t the best choice of words because of the aspect of personal possession that it suggests. The Mass is “ours”, not mine. Our Lord invites us to come together, to meet together around the altar, as members of his family. It is a communal celebration, a family gathering, a family meal. It’s all about “us”, not me; what’s best for the community, not what my personal preference might be.

There is also the fact that, by Canon Law, a priest is only supposed to celebrate one Mass a day (CC. 905). “If there is a scarcity of priests, (the Bishop) may for a good reason allow priests to celebrate twice in one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holydays of obligation.” The fact that

people are reluctant to gather together for one large communal celebration doesn't constitute "pastoral need" and especially when, as a result, the church is perhaps only half-full for two or three Masses on Sundays when it could and should be comfortably full for one. But also how many people have considered the situation from the priest's point of view rather than just their own? Let me explain...

It goes without saying that all Masses are special, but Mass on Sundays and holydays (being "solemnities", days of particular spiritual significance and observance) should be celebrated accordingly. The Eucharist is, as the catechism reminds us, "the heart and summit of the Church's life" (para 1407) "the sum and summary of our faith" (para 1327). For many Catholics, unable to get to church during the week, Sunday Mass is understandably - and rightly - the spiritual highpoint of their week. And because we no longer have "low" and "high" Masses as we once did, each Sunday celebration is of equal importance and therefore, whichever Mass a person chooses to attend, their experience should be, as far as possible, the same. Consequently the priest has to invest himself in that celebration accordingly - physically, emotionally and spiritually - something that is not made any easier when there is more than one Mass and also when one celebration follows soon after another. The comparison isn't the best, but in some respects it's a little like the cast of a play or musical who have to give of their best at a matinée performance and then their best once again at an evening performance soon after. The audience deserves at least that much from them. I wonder if people ever think about that in connection with the Mass? Do they appreciate the demands that multiple celebrations place on the priest as he tries to make each Sunday Mass at which he presides as similar and (for all the right reasons) as memorable an experience and celebration as possible for each congregation?

The "cold light of day" reality that many dioceses are increasingly having to consider is how many parishes they have, how many priests there are to serve them, and just how many people are going to Mass in all the various churches (with the inevitable implications this that has for income, ministry and support). In some cases the unavoidable writing on the wall may be that some churches will have to close and parishes be amalgamated. A slightly less radical solution may be the possibility of reducing the number of Masses being celebrated in order to enhance, if that's the right word, the effectiveness of the service and ministry that priests are trying to provide.

We can't continue to provide Masses in the numbers we have been - priests are fewer and ageing and trying to do so is literally killing them. In my previous parish there were two of us, but we had four churches to cover and five weekend Masses. I thought I was managing, but (though I wasn't aware of it) my body was beginning to react badly to the stress and pressures of trying to

cope with a Sunday Mass schedule of convenience (for the people, not the priests) and administering an amalgamation of what had once been four independent parishes served by six or seven priests. We were just two. You do the maths – it just doesn't work. I'm not exactly a spring chicken, but there are many priests older than me who continue trying to cope with Mass provision situations that really need to be addressed and resolved before they drive themselves into an early grave. A dead priest is no use to anyone.

It really isn't realistic to continue thinking in terms of Mass being when we are used to it being, or of having the same number of Masses that we may have been used to, and it would surely be better to start getting used to future possibilities and preparing for them in our minds at least, than pretending it's never going to happen and then reacting badly when it has to. Reacting negatively when such decisions have to be made and writing letters to the bishop and the Pope (as some will) doesn't change the reality that made those decisions necessary. Surely it would be better to be aware of the reality of the situation and to at least start thinking about the changes that might have to be made so that we can accommodate ourselves to them as peacefully as possible – less a case of forewarned is forearmed, as forewarned is far better.

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Fr Neil McNicholas