

“Wish You Were Here”

The stereotype postcard greeting from our holiday destination is: “Wish you were here”. I suppose it depends on who we are writing to as to whether we really do wish they were there because, of course, the whole point of a holiday is to get away from everything and everyone...except, surely, God?

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When I was growing up I don't ever remember not wanting to go to church on Sundays – it's what you did, but whether it was a completely free choice, or more a matter of guilt (and mortal sin) avoidance, I don't remember. Q.232 of the old “penny catechism” was: *Is it a mortal sin to neglect to hear Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation?* And the answer was yes it was and, of course, it still is. But as I have said on many occasions before, that on its own would be a very sad and impoverished reason for going to Sunday (or holyday) Mass. Hopefully, over the years, we have developed a far more positive approach to the celebration of the eucharist and that we go to Mass – especially on Sundays and holydays – because we want to, because it's important to us, and because we would be spiritually impoverished for the week if we didn't.

All the better therefore, we would say, to be able to go to Mass on weekdays also, when it is completely a matter of free choice and we are there absolutely because we want to and not at all because we have to. Ideally that's where we should be in our relationship with God – a relationship of love and freedom of choice, not law and obligation. And that's basically how I seem to remember Mass-going over the years and so, even if I were not a priest (which obviously makes my situation now a little different), I would never dream of missing Mass on Sundays or holydays - unless the reason was completely beyond my control as it was for one particular year.

Unemployed as a result of giving up a perfectly good career to test my first real experience of a vocation (a test which seemed to indicate, at that time at least, that it wasn't what God had in mind for me), returning home from the seminary the only hope of a job - for me as for many others in this country with unemployment levels as high as they were at the time – was in the Middle East. The job offer when it came was one I, quite literally, couldn't afford to turn down, but my major reservation was that I expected that there would no opportunity to go to church in that particular part of the world. It was only when I was given the assurance that “church” was in fact to be found, albeit unofficially, that I went ahead and accepted the job with a clear conscience.¹

¹ One of the strange things about it was that because the Muslim holy day is Friday, our weekend was Thursday/Friday and therefore “Sunday” Mass was celebrated on Fridays.

Things were not quite so straightforward some years later when I returned to that same country but this time in a location where I knew church would not be available.

I had been to university in America in the interim and had ended up in hospital for fairly serious and (it being America) very expensive surgery which was only partially covered by my student health insurance. Back in this country I had those quite extensive bills to pay off, but unemployment was still running high. Once again the offer of a job in the Middle East came along and while, as I say, I knew Mass would not be available where I was going, it seemed to me that God wouldn't have sent the job my way if I wasn't supposed to take it, and especially as I had those medical bills to pay – so I went.

For all sorts of reasons it was a very difficult year and I'm sure a lot of it had to do with not being regularly spiritually nourished and strengthened by Mass and the sacraments. Looking back now, I don't actually remember what I did to try to fill the gap. Personal prayer remained important, but I suppose there was no point in dwelling on not being able to go to Mass - it was an absolute impossibility and that's how it was. Thankfully that particular contract was only for a year, and it wasn't in fact a total loss because I think I learned a lot in terms of what it means to be deprived of the freedom to practise one's religion, a situation I had never been in before and therefore a freedom I may, perhaps, have taken for granted prior to that experience. I wouldn't take it for granted again.

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Why, you may be wondering, am I telling you all this, well...

Consider for a moment how important Mass is to you and why celebrating Sunday Mass and, if you are able, receiving holy communion should be a minimal requirement in terms of claiming to be a practising Catholic. And this again takes us back to the principle of going to Mass by choice, and not by obligation, because of its importance to us, the Eucharist being “the source and summit of the Christian life...the sum and summary of our faith... Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.”² It's who we are as Catholics, it's what we do, and it's quite literally at the heart of our relationship with God in Christ.

It is perhaps for this reason that people will mention in confession that they have missed Sunday Mass even when it wasn't their fault – which, of course, isn't a sin. (It's the experience of a void in their week, a void they greatly

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras 1324 & 1327.

regret, to the point of needing to bring that to God in confession to, as it were, have the void filled with the grace and strength of that sacrament in the absence of the grace and spiritual nourishment specific to the sacrament they missed.) It's only seriously (mortally) sinful when we miss Mass as a result of a deliberate choice on our part not to go when we could have and should have (ie/ on Sundays and holydays). It may also be sinful, though perhaps less seriously so, if we are away from home and haven't bothered to find out where a Catholic church is or the times of Masses – a sin of omission and something we perhaps need to think about as the holiday season approaches.

The whole point of a holiday is to leave everything behind, detaching ourselves completely from our normal routine in order to rest, relax and unwind, and the further a-field we travel, the easier that should be. The trouble is that we can become so focused on leaving our normal day-to-day routine and commitments behind that the proverbial baby gets thrown out with the bathwater and our Sunday commitment to God can get left behind as well. The reality is, of course, that we can't (and surely shouldn't want to) take a holiday from God. Given that we go to church every Sunday when we are at home – again hopefully not because we *have* to, but because we *want* to - then is finding out if and where there is a Catholic church part of our holiday planning? Is it a question we ask the travel agent? And (and I'm not trying to play the guilt card here) if there isn't a Catholic church, would it make us consider an alternative destination?

If we are going on a cruise, will there be a Catholic chaplain on the ship? The "Apostleship of the Sea" certainly tries its best to find priests on behalf of cruise lines, but there are fewer and fewer these days who are able to leave busy parishes for the sort of time required for a cruise and the only possibility may be retired priests. It may seem like a cushy number for a priest going on cruise after cruise and without having to pay, but it can be a very demanding commitment to make, which is why it may not appeal to retired (therefore possibly elderly) priests. Some of the larger cruise ships can accommodate as many as three-and-a-half-thousand passengers of whom a good proportion could be Catholics. In addition there may be as many as fifteen hundred crew members, typically from India and the Philippines and therefore largely Catholic, and because they are at sea almost continuously a chaplain's ministry to them (especially in terms of celebrating Mass and hearing confessions) can occupy a great deal of his time in addition to his ministry to the passengers.

It is hard to understand, therefore, how, on a cruise ship packed with all manner of social and recreational provisions for its passengers, that cruise companies can omit to include the provision (also for the crew) of a chaplain of any denomination let alone Catholic. Again, would it cross your mind to ask the cruise or travel company about the availability of a Catholic chaplain before you

sign up? If there isn't one, does the itinerary allow visits to local churches in ports along the way and, if so, does the agent have, or can they find out, the times of Masses? It shouldn't be too much to expect given the cost of cruises.

I don't know that I would go so far as to say that God would expect us not to go on a particular holiday if there was no opportunity to go to Mass, but I would hope that it would be enough of a concern to us (again because of its importance and not the aspect of obligation) that, wherever possible, it would be a factor in our choice of holiday. And, of course, if we know that despite our best efforts there isn't going to be the opportunity wherever we are going, then perhaps we can go to Mass immediately before we leave or as soon as we return, even if it's a weekday rather than the Sunday celebration we may miss or have missed.

Even on holiday people never seem to be more than two seconds away from their mobile phone - the one thing they don't ever leave behind! God is even closer, all the time, even on holiday, the companion who accompanies us at no extra charge. "Wish you were here" our postcards read. God already is, and our relationship with, and our faith commitment to, him continue no matter how far we travel.

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Fr Neil McNicholas