

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas December 21, 2008 B

WHY CATHOLICS DO NOT ATTEND CHURCH ON A REGULAR BASIS. TEN REASONS AND RESPONSES

There are about fifty or sixty million baptized Catholics in America. About 30% attend church on a regular basis. This means that about 70% of the Catholics in Melbourne do not attend church, or do so but rarely or on an irregular basis. Or they attend a non-Catholic church, which many do. If you are one of them, I invite you:

- to read my ten reasons why Catholics do not attend church
- share with me the reason(s) you do not attend the Catholic Church on a regular basis or why you do not attend a Catholic Church.

If you do attend church regularly and have a family member, neighbor or co-worker who does not, you may wish to share this column with them and let them know that I would love to hear from them. My email address and phone number are at the end of this column. Or you may wish to share with me the reason(s) your family member, neighbor or co-worker does not attend church.

Reason #1. Hectic schedules

Response: Many people work 60+ hours a week. If they have children, they are often very involved with sports and other activities on the weekend. As a result, church gets squeezed out of their schedule.

Having said that, the fact is that millions of very busy families in our nation do make it to church weekend after weekend. Why? Because God and church are high priority for them. *We always have time for what is important.*

Reason #2. Laziness

Response: Many Catholics (and I am sure many other Christians as well) will readily admit that laziness is the reason they do not make it to church on Sunday. They are just too lazy to get dressed and come.

Going to church is a good habit. When we develop this good habit, we fit it into our schedule every weekend. When we travel, we try to make it to church. When we get out of the habit, we find it very easy not to go. We develop a resistance to changing an old habit.

How can one overcome a lazy habit? I am not sure. I assume that God has to touch one's heart and convince one that coming to church is important. We who go to church can pray for that touch of God *and*, of course, be a good example of Christian living.

Reason #3. The poor example of clergy and churchgoers

As we all know, many non-churchgoers live very good lives. In fact, many of them are very good neighbors and co-workers; they are involved in helping the poor and in doing

other good activities. Unfortunately, some, if not many, churchgoers are *not* good examples of gospel values. They are lousy neighbors, rude to others, greedy, self-centered and unjust in their dealings with others. In short, they are a very poor advertisement for Christianity. Gandhi used to say: "I like your Gospel, but, I don't like the way you practice it."

Also, too many Catholics have had a bad experience with a priest or other religious. They were treated unkindly or had been responded to badly in a time of need. And, of course, the recent report on priests who sexually molested children, did enormous damage.

Response: It would be nice if all churchgoers and clergy were saintly people. Unfortunately, we are not. Instead, we are sinners hopefully trying to improve our lives. It has been said that "church is a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints." Even when we read the New Testament, we quickly discover that some of the Apostles were rather imperfect, and lots of bickering and even some scandalous behavior occurred within the first Christian communities.

People sometimes search for a perfect church. No such church exists. Having said that, we who do go to church, have a huge responsibility to be a good example of Christian behavior to all whom we come in contact with. It is scandalous when churchgoing Christians act in ways very contrary to the teachings of Christ.

Reason #4. "The Mass is boring"

Response: I know parents have heard that statement from their children. But many adults also find the Mass boring. Many adults today bring a 'consumer mentality' to Church. They come looking for a message and worship service that will up lift them.

The Catholic Mass is a reenactment of the Last Supper, which took place the evening before Jesus died a cruel death on the cross. We can assume that it was a very serious and solemn event. We can also assume that it was in no way entertaining.

Ideally, when we come to Mass we come to "give" (Eucharist = thanksgiving). *At Mass, we primarily come to give thanks to God for sending us Jesus.* If we come primarily "to be fed", we may set ourselves up for disappointment. Of course, at the most "boring Mass", we are always fed with the most precious Body and Blood of Christ. What food/drink could be better than that? Having said all that, those in charge of preparing the liturgy should do all that they can to make it a prayerful and uplifting service for all who attend. When the music and homily is poor and when the congregation is unfriendly and uninvolved, it is very hard to feel blessed by the liturgy. So it behooves *everyone*: presider, music and song leaders, readers, greeters and the congregation to be the best that they

can be every time they participate in Mass.

An added challenge in big Catholic parishes is the number of Masses on the weekend. It would be great if we could have wonderful chairs, cantors, musicians, homilists and congregation at *every* mass. But this is not easy. Nevertheless, we must continue to make every Mass as prayerful and inspiring as we can. To that end, *you* can help by being as friendly as you can at Mass, joining in the singing and praying with devotion.

Reason #5. Loss of faith in the Eucharist

Response: Catholics believe that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass. This belief is firmly stated in Scripture (Jn 6:53-71, 1 Cor. 11:28-34). Catholics believe that when we receive the bread and wine at Mass, we are actually receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. A Baptist minister once said: "If I believed what you Catholics believed about the Eucharist, I would come crawling on my hands and knees to receive my Savior." Unfortunately, millions of Catholics, raised to believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, lose that faith or it becomes unimportant to them. This is true not only for non-churchgoers, but also for Catholics who attend other Christian churches which do not serve the Eucharist or which only serve it infrequently. They do not believe that they are partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ. If a Catholic really believed in his/her heart that the Jesus who lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago was now truly present body, soul and divinity in the bread and wine at every Mass, how could he/she not come to partake of the Eucharist?

Interestingly enough, many Protestants who convert to Catholicism, and Catholics who join other Christian churches and subsequently return to the Catholic Church, often convert or return because of their new-found faith and understanding of what the Eucharist is all about. People interested in these stories are encouraged to read *Surprised by the Truth* books. There are now three different books, each one relating a dozen or more stories of converts or reverts (returning Catholics) who, after much study, converted or reverted to the Catholic Church. Copies of the *Surprised by the Truth* books may be purchased from our parish office (tel. 254-1595 ext. 3050 or email fdowney@ascensioncatholicsh.net) or from amazon.com.

Reason #6. Lack of support from a spouse or extended family

Response: Blessed are the families in which *both* spouses make it a point to attend church on Sunday, and twice blessed are the young families who have extended families in the area who also attend church regularly, and perhaps make attending Mass a time to be together and go to breakfast or lunch afterwards. When the opposite is true, it is very difficult. One spouse has little or no interest in church; even parents who live in the area may have lost faith in the Eucharist and in Church. This is a situation when the other spouse has to be very strong especially if small children and teenagers are involved. When one parent makes a big effort to come to Mass with his/her kids even though there is little or no support from a spouse or one's extended

family, I believe God has to be particularly pleased with such a person.

Reason #7. Hassle of getting very young children ready for and keeping them quiet in church

Response: I am sure all parents of very young children will agree that this is a big challenge especially if one has two or more children. The good news is that many wonderful parents rise to the challenge Sunday after Sunday. God bless them!

Dealing with very young children in church. The preferred option is to have them in church. Whether we realize it or not, young children are taking into their little minds and hearts the sights, sounds and smells (e.g., incense) of what occurs in church. As most of you know, I do encourage parents to sit up front with young children so that they can see what is going on. I strongly discourage families from sitting in the cry room.

If during Mass, one parent has to get up and take a child out for a short break, that is okay. Some parents bring a children's bible or another type of children's book. Consider rewarding children for good behavior. One dad rewards his children by going to the hall for a donut after Mass. If one child misbehaves, he/she gets to watch his/her siblings eat their donut.

Some parents conclude that the hassle of trying to keep their children quiet in church is too much. In this case, they can make good use of our free childcare during the 9:30 and 11:30 AM Masses. Another option is to alternate. One spouse comes to church one Sunday while the other remains at home with the children and vice versa the following Sunday. While this is a less preferred option, it is much better than both parents remaining at home.

Reason #8. Problems with some of the Church's teachings

Response: It would be nice if all of us perfectly embraced and practiced all of the teachings of Christ and the Church. The truth is that most, or none of us do not. Life is imperfect and so are we. Having said that, some teachings are central to who we are as Catholics, e.g., the teachings expressed in the Creed, the seven sacraments and the Ten Commandments. For most, if not all of us, coming to embrace and practice the teachings of Christ and his Church is a work always in progress.

Reason #9. Bad things happening to good people can cause some Catholics to separate themselves from God and Church

Response: When bad things happen to people who try to live a good life, it can be a faith-buster. We don't understand how a good and all-powerful God does not heal one's sick spouse who is only 45 years old, or not heal a child. Such an experience can cause one to quit relating to God or to relate to him in a very superficial way. A break in our relationship with God usually leads to a break in our relationship with the Church.

Needless to say, no one has a good answer as to why God allows bad things, even terrible things, to happen to very

good people. After all, he allowed a terrible thing to happen to his own Son. Sooner or later, faith involves trusting God's ways even when they make absolutely no sense to us. After all, sometimes the ways of a parent makes no sense to a child. Ideally, the bad stuff in life is only a "faith-tester" and not a "faith-buster". In tough times, our faith is indeed tested. But if we hang in there (like couples in difficult times), our faith will deepen.

Hopefully, none of us have to go through difficult times without the support of faith-friends. Surely one reason to be involved in church is to connect with people who can help us through the painful moments of life, especially through those times that shake up our faith. Finally, when going through tough times, Satan's plan is to make us bitter and angry at God. God's plan is to use the bad times to deepen our faith relationship with him.

Reason #10. I do my own thing spiritually. I don't want to be involved with an institutional church with all its rules and laws

Response: God made us to be social human beings and did not intend for us to be spiritual loners in life. "It is not good for men to be alone" (Gen 2: 6). Shortly after Jesus started his public ministry, he called twelve Apostles to be part of his team. In Matt 16 we read that Jesus created a Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, those who believed in Jesus gathered together weekly to pray together and listen to the teachings of the Apostles. Institutional religion is *God's* idea. When we read the *Acts of the Apostles*, we find absolutely no basis for what we can call a "churchless Christianity" - a Christianity that does not involve participation in a church family.

Surely, a big church like the Catholic Church with over a billion members can seem too bureaucratic and political at times. But through it all, God has created thousands of very holy people.

Protestant Historian Reflects

Regarding the Catholic Church, the English Protestant historian, Thomas Babington MacCaulay (19th century) wrote:

There is not, and there never was on earth, a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon... The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday compared with the line of Supreme Pontiffs... The republic of Venice... was modern when compared with the Papacy. . . The Papacy remains not in decay, but full of life and vigor.

The Church saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist... We feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished in Antioch... And she may still exist... When some traveler from

New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.

Morning Prayer

God of my life, I welcome this new day.
It is your gift to me,
A new creation, a promise of resurrection.
I thank you for the grace of being alive this morning.
I thank you for the sleep that has refreshed me.
I thank you for this chance to make a new beginning.
This day, Lord, is full of promise and opportunity;
let me waste none of it.
This day is full of mystery and the unknown:
help me to face it without fear or anxiety.
This day is blessed with beauty and adventure;
make me fully alive to it.
During this day keep me thoughtful,
prayerful and kind.
May I be courteous and helpful to others,
and not turned in on myself.
Keep me from any word or deed
that would hurt or belittle another.
And may the thoughts of my mind be
pleasing in your sight.
When night comes again,
may I look back on this day with no grievance
or bitterness in my heart.
And may nobody be unhappy because of anything
I have done or anything I have failed to do.
Lord, bless this day for me and everyone.
Make it a day in which we grow to have the mind
Of Christ, your Son. Amen.

We are delighted you joined us for our Christmas celebration of Christ's birth. If you live in the area and do not have a church home, we would love if you would consider coming back to see us in the New Year. Our doors and hearts are always open to receiving you. If you have any questions or comments on this column, do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you. A big thank you to all of you who helped in any way to make our Advent and Christmas liturgies prayerful.

Merry Christmas,

