



**Fourth Sunday of Advent
And Christmas**

December 23, 2012 C

- **Reasons to consider making Ascension your spiritual home if you do not have one**
- **Ten reasons why many Catholics do not attend church on a regular basis**

Greetings and Merry Christmas to all of you!

Thank you for joining Ascension Church for the celebration of that awe-filled moment in human history when God decided to join our human family.

- a little bit about Ascension Church family
- suggested good spiritual reading for both Catholics and non-Catholics alike
- ten reasons and responses on why a large number of Catholics do not attend church regularly

A little bit about Ascension Church family

Our parish, which was founded in 1959, has a current attendance of close to 3,000 individuals at its five weekend Masses. The Sunday 9:30am Mass is enriched with traditional church music sung by our choir while the Sunday 5:30 pm Mass is alive with contemporary Christian music.

Our parish school, which is very highly regarded in Brevard County, has an enrolment of about 500 children (from Pre-K-3 to 8th grade). We have a very active Junior High and High School Ministry. Faith formation classes are available to public school children on Tuesdays (4:00 - 5:15pm) and Wednesdays (6:30 - 7:45pm).

Many adult parishioners are engaged in one or more of our adult faith programs and outreach ministries. More details on these activities in a moment.

Following the example of Jesus, Ascension seeks to welcome all truth-seekers, irrespective of their background—Catholic, non-Catholic, non-Christian, married, single, divorced, straight and gay, poor and rich, sinners and saints. To be less than welcoming to ALL would be unfaithful to Jesus who welcomed everyone during his public ministry. We also seek to faithfully proclaim the full gospel that Jesus taught, realizing that none of us fully embrace *all* of his teachings.

Over 100 years ago, Irish writer George B. Shaw said:

“My life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatsoever I can. I

want to be thoroughly used up when I die.... Life is no ‘brief candle.’ To me it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

Life is gift. What we do with our lives is our gift to God and the world we live in.

Suggested reading

1. *Facing Adversity with Grace—Lessons from the Saints* is a wonderful book by Woodene Koenig-Bricker which deals with 14 types of suffering such as physical pain, mental and spiritual struggles, addictions, temptation, divorce, marital discord, financial stress, grief, old age. It has a final chapter on life lessons on suffering.

The book is an in-depth, realistic and wise observation on the great mystery of human suffering from a woman who has experienced divorce and lives with a serious physical disability. Concerning the book, James Martin, S.J., author of *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Anything*, says: *“In this beautiful new book, readers will learn lessons about almost every type of human difficulty.”* This book will be on sale Christmas Eve/Day.

2. *Genius Born of Anguish: The Life and Legacy of Henri Nouwen* by Michael Higgins and Kevin Burns is another great book I read recently. As some of you know, the late Henri Nouwen, priest/psychologist who taught at Harvard, Yale and Notre Dame, is one of the most highly read spiritual authors of our time whose books are read by Christians and non-Christians. It is amazing how God used such an anguished human soul to touch the lives of so many people.

3. *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything—A Spirituality for Real Life*, By James Martin, S.J. Concerning this book, John Allen says: “James Martin is arguably the best writer today on Catholic Spirituality. This book on his order (Ignation) spirituality is my five-star, slam-dunk, can’t-miss tip of the year. The book is a winner.”

4. *Marriage 911—How God Saved Our Marriage (and can save yours, too!)* by Greg & Julie Alexander. “Greg and Julie Alexander had run out of wine, run out of the joy of married love. But then Greg and Julie found ‘new

wine,' and they couldn't keep it to themselves. Their story has given hope to couples around the world who have seen them on TV, heard them speak; or been part of their marriage coaching program" (Christopher West).

Ten reasons and responses on why Catholics do not attend church on a regular basis

There are about fifty or sixty million baptized Catholics in America, about 30% of whom 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. 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

If you do attend church regularly and are aware of family members, neighbors or co-workers who do 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 their reason(s) for not attending 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 weekends. 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.

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. 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 churchgoers are *not* good examples of gospel values. They are lousy neighbors, rude, 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 reports on priests who sexually molested children have caused enormous damage to the Church.

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 good examples of Christian behavior to all whom we come in contact with. It is scandalous when churchgoing Christians act in ways that are 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 feel the same way. They bring a 'consumer mentality' to church when they come looking for a message and worship service that will uplift 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) of ourselves. *At Mass, we primarily come to give thanks to God for sending us Jesus.* If we come mainly "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? Be that as it may, those in charge of preparing the liturgy should do all they can to make it a prayerful and uplifting service for all who attend. When the music and homily are lacking or 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 choirs, 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 possible. To that end, *you* can help by being friendly and welcoming 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, 1Cor. 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 believe 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*. This book offers biblical and historical basis for why eleven Protestant pastors were surprised by the truth of the Catholic Church and subsequently converted to Catholicism. 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.

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 have 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 in which 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 church 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) 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 of us do not. Life is imperfect and so are we. Some teachings, e.g., the Creed, the Seven Sacraments and the Ten Commandments, are central to who we are as Catholics. For most 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 the 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 would not heal a very sick child or a seriously ill spouse who is only 45 years old. 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. The ways of a parent sometimes makes no sense to a child. Hopefully, 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 family and 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 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" 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.

For those of you who are computer savvy, here are YouTube links to a Catholic man and woman who left the church and returned. You may be interested in their stories.

Mike D'Andrea was a football star, an occasional Catholic and is now a family man and business success. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dMgQhgwQqU&list=SP97DC29A06F85B07E&index=102>

Peggy Bowes also a cradle Catholic, is a pilot and fitness coach living a worldly lifestyle who also returned home to her Catholic faith.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORp94E6dwnM>.

Protestant historian reflects

Regarding the Catholic Church, the 19th century English Protestant historian, Thomas MacCaulay 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.

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, please 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,

