



The Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ B

June 3, 2018

- **10 pastoral challenges and responses related to our weekend celebration of the Eucharist**
- **Six People respond why they attend Mass on Sunday.**

As I looked at my Corpus Christi file for past columns on the Eucharist, I came across one from 1995 while I was still at my last parish in Cocoa Beach. I was a bit surprised to find that the inherent pastoral challenges on the Eucharist 23 years ago are still very much the same today. My 1995 column listed eight challenges, to which I have now added two more. I'm sure you could add a few more. If so, I would love to hear from you. I will first name the ten challenges and then comment on each one of them.

1. A large number of Catholics rarely, if ever, attend Mass on Sunday.
2. A sizable number of Catholics attend only sometimes. They miss Mass for reasons that lack substance (e.g., "We had company from out of town.")
3. A recent poll shows that a large number of Catholics who attend church on a regular or fairly regular basis no longer believe in the doctrine of the Real Presence, i.e., that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass.
4. There are those who seem to be more like *spectators* rather than active *participants* at Mass.
5. Some Catholics come primarily to *receive* rather than *give* worship to God; hence, the often-heard complaint: "I get nothing out of the Mass."
6. There are also those who approach the Mass as if it were a private devotion and not a public and community worship of God.
7. Many Catholics have developed the "eat and run" habit. They get their communion and walk straight out the door. At Ascension, this happens at the Vigil Mass more than at any other Mass.
8. Many Catholics still make little or no connection between the Mass and their daily lives. Many fail to live their Monday to Saturday in keeping with what they preach, hear, or ritualize on Sunday.

9. Many Catholics have a ways to go when it comes to showing hospitality to those around them.

10. **Poor preaching.** People come hoping to receive a word of life, to hear how the readings connect to their lives.

Some comments/responses

The following comments are in no way comprehensive.

1. On non-churchgoers: I'm not sure what percentage of Catholics attend Mass on a regular basis. I know it varies from region to region. My guesstimate, based on the Door-to-Door Ministry we carried out for a year, is that about 7 out of 10 Catholics do *not* attend Mass.

When it comes to non-churchgoing Catholics, our job is never to judge them. Instead, we are called to *pray* for them, to *witness* to them if given the opportunity, and perhaps *invite* them to some of our parish events like Wonderful Wednesday and/or one of our parish missions.

2. On missing Mass: While some Catholics may have very good reasons for not getting to church on the weekend, many others will readily admit that their excuse is lame. They know all too well that the Eucharist is more important, but they somehow fail to find a way to be there. We always *make time* for what is important to us. It's about conviction or lack of it.

3. On the Real Presence: While some national polls show that a large percentage of Catholics no longer believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine, I am convinced that the vast majority of churchgoing Catholics continue to believe in the Real Presence.

4. On spectator versus active participants: We can gauge if we are active participants at Mass by the way we engage in the prayers and songs and by our effort to remain focused at what is going on.

We live in a very distracted world. We bring to church stuff going on in our lives. It takes a great effort to become active participants at Mass.

5. On coming to give: We come to Mass primarily to *give worship* and *thanks* to God. If we come with a *giving attitude*, there is a pretty good chance that we will leave feeling that we received (“*In giving we receive.*”) Having said that, if the singing is lousy, the readers are poor proclaimers, and the homily does nothing for us, then we will need to work harder at feeling that we have received.

6. On communal versus private prayer: The Mass is primarily communal prayer. We *greet* each other, join in the singing, and say the prayers together. This does not mean that there is *no room* for private or personal prayer during Mass. Of course there is, but the Mass is primarily prayer *we do* with our brothers and sisters. Outside of Mass, we can pray privately anytime and anywhere, like our hour in the Adoration Chapel.

7. On “eat and run” habit: Heading for the exit door right after communion is a terribly bad practice. I would love to get into the minds of those who have developed this habit. (Needless to say, I’m only referring to people who have no good reason to leave Mass.) If they do not want to get stuck in traffic (something I myself always try to avoid), I suggest that they stay in the back of the church after Communion, continue to be prayerfully present to our Lord, and leave after the Final Blessing.

8. On connecting the Liturgy with our daily lives: This perhaps is the most important point. If we make little or no effort to *be Eucharist* to others, to be a blessing to others, then we can ask ourselves, “Why are we at Mass?”

We are living a Eucharistic spirituality to the extent that we share our lives with one another, e.g., listening to those in need, sharing our time, treasure and talent, cheering the down and depressed, showing compassion, comforting the grieving, patiently carrying our cross, helping others carry their cross, forgiving those who hurt us, asking the forgiveness of those we hurt, helping those alienated to reconcile. These are some of the ways we can live the Mass.

9. On hospitality: If you were hosting a Mass at home, you would most surely warmly greet and welcome the attendees. Why should it be any different at church? Hospitality at Mass does *not* mean a lot of talking before Mass. But it does mean an attempt to recognize those around you with a simple smile. It has been well said that “*Friendly and praying communities draw people in; cold, non-praying (or poorly praying) communities drive people away.*”

10. On preaching: It’s sad to say but it is generally agreed that the preaching in Protestant churches,

especially in Evangelical churches, is much more engaging than in Catholic churches. This is sad. I assume that most, if not all, preachers would say that they wish they were as dynamic and on message as Bishop Curry who preached at Harry and Meghan’s wedding. (I never go to the pulpit unprepared.)

Please pray for us homilists at Ascension. Pray that we can *hear* what the Lord wants us to communicate and to speak his Word with conviction.

Note on the Doctrine of Real Presence

Catholic Christians believe and profess that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass. This solemn belief of ours is based on the Scriptures. At the Holy Supper, Jesus takes bread and says: “*This is my body,*” and not: “*This symbolizes my body.*” He then takes a cup of wine and says: “*This is my blood,*” and not: “*This symbolizes my blood.*”

In John 6, Jesus gives a long discourse on himself as the bread of life. He says: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”

When some of the disciples leave Jesus because his teaching has become too much for them, he does not follow them and offer to water down what he has just said.

Jesus’ words remain and have been faithfully taught and believed by Catholic Christians for two thousand years.

Examination of conscience around the Mass

1. What do you believe about the Mass? What do you think the Mass is all about?
2. Do you believe that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass?
3. Do you believe that God speaks to us in his Word at Mass?
4. Do you believe in the presence of Christ in the assembly at Mass?
5. Do you attend Mass on a regular basis? Is so, why? If not, why not?
6. Do you tend to be a spectator at Mass — or an active participant?
7. Have you bought into the community dimension of the Mass or do you tend to still see Mass as a private prayer, something between you and God?

8. Do you come to Mass to primarily receive or to give?
9. Do you come to Mass because of the obligation or because the Mass is very important to you?
10. Do you usually get to Mass on time and stay to the end?

Six People Respond Why They Attend Mass on Sunday.

Some years ago, *U.S. Catholic* magazine asked its readers to share their answers to the above question, and also to whether attending Mass should be an obligation. Here are some of the responses:

1. *I attend Mass regularly on Sunday out of habit. It is part of my life, just like brushing my teeth and cooking dinner. That's not to say I don't enjoy going to Mass, however, or that I would stop going if it were made voluntary. It just means that Mass is a part of me. But I also go to set an example for my children. I want them to know God and to learn how to become Christians who serve a community. In order to do this, they must have repeated experiences of Mass attendance. And I am not the only role model they have in this regard; their friends who attend Mass and Sunday School with them also are models of what it means to be a part of the Catholic Christian community.*

2. *We are **teenagers** and come from a strong Catholic family, and we go to Sunday Mass because: (1) it's expected, (2) we don't want to let our parents down, (3) we want to be an example to our younger brother and sister, (4) attendance is the rule of the house as long as we live with our parents, and (5) sometimes it's fun.*

Will Catholics go to hell if they repeatedly miss Mass? God did not say that; and besides, there are other ways of fulfilling your obligation.

3. *As a college mathematics teacher, I am convinced of the necessity of having an attendance-and-testing policy that helps students work toward successful learning. Human nature being what it is, there is a natural tendency to take it easy and to drift along unless there is some sort of demands put upon a person. When students at least attend my classes, some knowledge is absorbed.*

In the same way, I feel that our natural tendency toward laziness would work against the majority of Catholics attending Sunday Mass unless there was some sort of obligation present.

4. *Making Mass voluntary would be a mistake. Oh, I agree that no one should be brought up to believe that to miss Mass—even for a good reason—would send someone to hell. But I feel there are many Catholics who, even though they come out of a sense of guilt, find in Mass their only contact with the Catholic Church all week. I can't help but feel that sometimes attendance at church gives God the*

opportunity to talk to people that they may not allow him to do during the week. It would be too easy for these people to become lost to the church were not Mass obligatory. Not all habits are bad!

5. *Most Sundays I am up early and anxious to join with my family and fellow Catholics to praise and honor our God. But there have been mornings—cold, snowy, icy, tired mornings—when it was the Church's law requiring attendance at Mass that got me out of bed rather than my own good intentions. Once I sat in church, I was happy and gratified to be there as always and thankful that firm Church teachings had gotten me there at my own moments of personal weakness.*

6. *Sunday Mass shouldn't be an "obligation" but a responsibility. One's presence—whether convenient or inconvenient—is a responsibility one should freely choose in order to grow in his or her own faith and to help build the Body of Christ within their community.*

It's disheartening to see so many complacent faces in Mass. It's a small wonder that our Sunday Eucharist is so boring or unattractive when there are so many who don't know why they're there outside of "the law."

Additional thoughts to reflect on

- In modern day Iraq, Catholic families risk their lives to attend Mass on Sundays. In an interview with *60 Minutes*, one young adult said, "Half of my family goes to one Mass and half to another Mass." When asked why, the young man answered, "In this way, if the church is blown up by a terrorist bomb, at least half of my family will survive."
- In many poor countries, Catholics will *walk* one or two hours each way to attend Mass. Such is their dedication to the Eucharist.

In contrast to the above commitment to the Eucharist, millions of Catholics who live in nice homes close to a church and drive nice cars, find it too much of a "sacrifice" or too much of an inconvenience to come to Mass on Sunday. All of us should often pray that the Holy Spirit would open our minds and our hearts to the tremendous gift God is offering us when we choose to actively participate in the Mass.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran