

Why are we here today?

Many of us go to Mass each week, but the “why” we go can be sometimes something we don’t think a whole lot about. I suspect some would say because it’s something they’ve done their whole life, or is just a part of their weekend routine. But my hope would be that most people would say they were at Mass because they wanted to grow closer to God, and knew that here there was something they were going to receive that they could get nowhere else.

Greg Schlueter, who is a Catholic film producer, writer and speaker, like millions of others, goes to Mass each week. But last summer, when he was at Mass, he got a reminder of why he goes and the significance of what happens at Mass.

He walked into church and was struck by a peculiar sight. A healthy, younger (40-ish) woman was moving along with a walker. She was accompanied by an older man. Greg’s son, John Paul, was helping her. The two had a subdued solemnity, even joy, mixed with a kind of heaviness he could not explain. Greg welcomed them to their church and inquired where they were from. They said Erie, Pennsylvania, which was Greg’s wife’s home of 43 years.

Of course, Greg had to go retrieve his wife, who had already made her way to the front of the church and was praying in preparation for Mass.

The story unfolded. The gentleman showed them pictures from two months earlier, in a room down in Florida preparing for open heart surgery. He showed a photo of his beautiful wife smiling next to him. Another, with this woman, his daughter. Another yet, with his son.

And he shared photos of a car smashed beyond recognition.

Tears streaming down his face, the man explained that when he had awoken from heart surgery, the surgeon informed him that there was bad news. He thought it had to do with the surgery, but it did not. During his post surgery recovery the three had been driving. A car crossed over the median and smashed into them, killing both his wife and his son. His surviving daughter was undergoing therapy on her leg, thus, the walker.

They were in Toledo because the woman, her husband and family had moved to the area. The dad was staying with them for the time being.

Here, before Mass, Greg reflected that he and his wife were so blessed to share tears streaming down all their faces with once strangers who had become dear friends. Unbelievable blessings poured out as they were about to approach their common Lord and Savior, seeking his healing, transformation and renewal of heart, mind, body and soul.

Through all this something was stirring deeper inside of Greg that continued to “haunt” him weeks after, awakening him to awareness of his participation in the Mass. “This is

my body, broken for you”— the profound blessing in Jesus Christ that comes by way of brokenness. “Body of Christ” — a holy communion forging our real lives together in His Real Presence.

Greg writes how he is awakening to the awareness of how deeply our God desires such great and total intimacy with us, and in Him, with one another.

This is the entire purpose of Mass, he reflects. Not an isolated event once a week, but the epicenter of our human existence. Our ultimate drama from disassociated pieces to “whole,” as in “holy.” Singular, sacred intimacy with God, and in Him, with one another.

Whether atheist, Muslim, Hindu, Jew or Christian, four movements define our own lives. They are proclaimed in every story ever told. We live (Life). We encounter a crucible (Death), through which we are more aware of our identity (Resurrection), from which flows our mission (Pentecost).

Life, Death, Resurrection and Pentecost.

Our lives proclaim us to be imago dei, the image of God. This ushers us into the life of the Trinity. Together we exist to make God, who is Love, known. A holy, missioned, community of persons. This is the DNA of our human existence. And the very heart of the Mass, which enables us to do that through the food and love given to us from Jesus.

Thus, his Encounter was powerful. And made possible through the risk of authentic, simple, vulnerable sharing. Former strangers ceased to be merely anonymous “dad, mom, daughter and son.” They became for us what they are known to God: Jim, Kathryn, Janice and Steve.

Real people. Real presence. Real relationship.

After Mass, his entire family sat with Jim and Janice and simply talked about other things. Greg reflects it was such a beautiful, powerful icon of God’s presence through both of them, and their wife/mother, son/brother, whom he had a definite sense were abiding with us in the conversation.

Greg and his family continued to think of them and prayed for them on the way home, and throughout the days that followed.

Sharing this story is one, small way Greg says he is making good on the exhortation at the end of Mass: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.”

He writes his story because he says each of our stories are woven together in the body of Jesus Christ. By God’s design, we are a communion of saints here on earth destined for eternity. This is the meaning of Holy Communion, the meaning of Holy Mass, the meaning of our lives.

I never have met Greg, but if I were conversing with him, I'd say he really gets what Mass is all about. It's our encounter with God, but it's also meant to change us as God heals us, comes to us, strengthens us, and then commissions us to do for one another what God does for us. And that's why it's worth thinking about Mass and asking ourselves as Catholics why we are here. Hopefully like Greg, we realize how important it is to be here.

Our Gospel this week tells the story of Jesus feeding the people through the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. And in the coming weeks, we'll be hearing more from John's sixth chapter where Jesus speaks of being the bread of life, and having the words of eternal life. Really though much of what we'll be hearing this week and in the weeks that follow has a lot to do with what Mass is all about. And it gives us the chance to ask ourselves do we realize what happens here, and do we open ourselves up to the kind of transformation that happened within Greg because of the Mass; the kind of transformation that brings us closer together and connects us as God's sons and daughters.

First and foremost, the Mass is a reminder to us of God's love for us and of how far God goes for us. The people follow Jesus because they want to be with Him; people from all walks of life. The Mass is not an additional sacrifice or repetition of Christ's sacrifice, but is a re-presentation of the one sacrifice of the cross. At Mass, the power of the sacrifice of our Lord who laid down his life for us, and its effects - how it takes away sins, heals and transforms, this becomes present and available to us. It's applied to our needs. But the resurrection too is made present. When we come to Mass as a community, we stand not just remembering the crucified Lord, but celebrating the risen Jesus who triumphs over evil and death. Jesus says at each Mass, "This is for you - I give my life to you." At Mass, we are reminded how Jesus offered himself to bring us salvation, and to give us His spirit too - and so at Mass, it is also a new Pentecost, a chance to receive the Spirit again. Mass connects us to the life-giving power of these saving events that change everything. We offer to the Father the perfect offering of his Perfect son. But so too is it our offering, as the Son makes us members of His body.

Like the people in the Gospel, like Greg and the people he met at Mass, all of us have different stories. But whether we are in a valley of life or doing well, all of us need God to see us through life, and just like He is waiting for the people to come to Him in the Gospel, He is waiting for us too, because His perfect sacrifice of love is there for us to change us and make us better people. At Mass this happens.

There are two main elements we have at Mass that we get a foreshadow of in the Gospel.

First, after we have acknowledged our sins and asked for God's love, and have the Liturgy of the Word. Jesus in the Gospel we are told sits down among the disciples; it's the position of a teacher. We sit and hear the words of God through the lector. And ideally, the homily is able to give people something to think about with respect to the word of God as well. As you listen to the words each week and take them in, all of us

can often find something that really speaks to us or challenges us. It's our chance to sit at the feet of the Master and be on the mountain top of you will.

We then pray the Creed and Prayers of the Faithful as a reminder of how we are all connected as part of the Body of Christ and then transition to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The people come to Jesus in the Gospel and it's clear they are hungry; Jesus sees this and asks Philip where can we get enough food to feed them. Again, it bears worth repeating, all of us are hungry. We are hurting from life, from mistakes, from stress and pressure. We sometimes try to fill the hungers we have with things other than God, and ultimately we are never filled. And so God comes to us, just as He came to the people on that mountain. Jesus is the new Passover Lamb; His body given up for us. We celebrate through the Eucharistic Prayer how Christ becomes the salvation of all of us who partake in that meal. The transformation of the bread and wine is a gift from God, given to us as food for the journey. Note the detail in the Gospel though that what is given to Jesus is five barley loaves and two fish. Obviously not very much. But it feeds everyone. It's a reminder that God can do so much good with us when we come to Him. Even when we seemingly have little to offer, His love comes into our souls and can take what might not seem like much and increase it. This is the transformative power of the Eucharist; it moves us further from sin, and brings us closer to one another.

Finally, as Greg shared in his story, the Eucharist is what brings us closer together. Last year the Holy Father spoke out against what he called "Christian parrots" who talk about religion but don't live it out through actions. In his words: "If I say I am Catholic and go to mass, but then don't speak with my parents, help my grandparents or the poor, go and see those who are sick, this does not prove my faith, there's no point.. Those who do this are nothing but Christian parrots - words, words words. Christian faith is expressed with three things: words, the heart and the hands." As it changed him, it changes us too. We are meant to bring Jesus to others. In the Gospel Jesus tells the apostles not to leave the fragments but to pick them up. When we do that, we bring Communion to the sick and the homebound. But we are also meant to bring Jesus to one another through how we lead our lives. Through so many actions, from conversations and praying with others as Greg did, to service and giving of our time, to listening to others and being there for them, we can help others to see Christ through us.

For most of us, Mass is something we have become accustomed to over many years. And there's something good about familiarity. But hopefully just because we know all of the words and gestures and when to stand and kneel, we remember why we do what we do. Even if we might not always realize it, like the people in the Gospel, we are hungry. The Mass is the gift Jesus gives us to help bring us closer to Him and to one another. As we prepare to be fed by our Lord now, may we call to mind our sins, our struggles, our shortcomings and turn them over to Him, and then take the food we are given to feed a hungry world with His love.