

The View from the Big Chair

Admittedly when I went to Mass on my own or with family, I always loved the back pew. As a bit of a “germ-o-phobe” it meant it was less likely for a person with bronchitis to cough into their hand and then offer the sign of peace, and there was the benefit of praying without the person with the rosary beads banging against the pew kneeling an inch from you as you sat and tried to pray. In all seriousness I guess I just always liked the back row and to this day will sit in the back pew alone sometimes as I say some prayers in our beautiful sanctuary.

These days I get my own chair which is the “big chair” behind the altar (and that’s a good thing as I’m not a small person). But while it is admittedly a little difficult as an introvert to be in front of people and no longer have the back pew as an option, it is so humbling and such an honor to lead the Mass, to pray with the people, and of course to stand as the unworthy servant of Jesus as I proclaim, preach and pray over the bread and wine invoking the Holy Spirit as we celebrate Mass together. To quote Archbishop Flynn, if I had a hundred lives to live, I’d live them all as a priest.

Being “up there” though you can’t help but notice things at Masses. Some are quite humorous, like that person with the cell phone who can’t figure out how a cell phone works let alone find it in their purse and then it goes off and they can’t turn it off, or that one person who starts reading the bulletin or balancing their checkbook or falls asleep as soon as the homily begins (can you give me at least 20 seconds before you check out?). But over the years some things I’ve noticed I think entail things that people might not think about in terms of things we do at Mass and things we can do to make all truly feel welcome. So in no particular order, here’s a few observations over a dozen years...

1) **The “Deer in the Headlights” late comer.** Sometimes people come to Mass late. I get it. There’s a train. The kids aren’t ready. Roads are icy. We leave the garage door open. Life happens. I’m just glad they decided to come to Mass. But when Mass has started, a person might enter and not know what to do, so kind of stand waiting to figure out what to do. Part of it I think entails being Minnesotan, as we do the same thing when trying to merge onto the freeway, not knowing we can actually merge and aren’t supposed to just kind of stop. So don’t worry about walking in to Mass or feel you have to hang out in the back of church for a while, find a spot you feel comfortable and “merge” into Mass.

2) **Kneeling first.** Believe it or not, there’s nothing in our liturgical rubrics that ask us to kneel before Mass. Many people like to however. And I always encourage folks to do what they feel is best for them spiritually. However, sometimes I notice people like to kneel even when they get to Mass late, and at that point the train has kind of left the station. If it is really important to a person I get it and I’d never say “hey don’t kneel,” but if everyone is standing or sitting or participating in a prayer, it’s quite OK to just join in with the rest of the congregation wherever we are at in the liturgy.

3) **Receiving Communion.** Sister Charlene taught me and a group of about 20 second

graders how to go to Communion, but over the years I've seen just about everything. I've had folks try to take the Communion out of the plate. I've had the response "yes it is" as opposed to "amen." And "thank you." I've had people come up in pairs too. And sometimes a person kneels. Or they receive on the tongue which is fine but aren't quite sure what to do. So as just a refresher, the norms for receiving Communion in the United States are to simply bow and say "amen" and receive on the hand or tongue. Kneeling is not prohibited but not the norm from our Bishops, and practically speaking it could cause a person behind someone to trip. If receiving on the tongue is a person's preference, I ask that they stick out their palette so it's easier for the distributor to place the Body of Christ on their tongue; if they don't it's easy for it to fall to the floor, as the host really isn't that big. We also receive individually as it's a unique moment between the person and their encounter with the Lord, and say "amen" as an acknowledgment to this being the Body of Christ.

Also, Catholics receive communion because we are in full communion with Christ's Church. This isn't "being mean" to people of other faiths. Christ didn't create many Churches, He created one, and unfortunately there is disunity in the Body. This is why at funerals and weddings I along with many priests politely explain that if you are not Catholic or "properly disposed" (more on that in a second) that you can come forth for a blessing folding your arms across your chest, or remain in the pew. I once had a man try to get into a debate with me over this, in Communion, right next to the casket at a funeral saying he was Lutheran but taking Communion anyway. Um, no sir, you aren't. Now it's not as if I ask people as they come up if they are Catholic or give them a quick orthodoxy test. A person follows their conscience. But while we pray for full unity, not all Christians believe what we believe about the Eucharist or are united in our Catholic faith, which is why Catholics receive Communion and we do not take Communion if visiting a Protestant church.

So what does "properly disposed" mean? It means you have not committed a grave sin. And remember, it has to be grave, you have to know it's grave, and you have to freely do it anyway. Communion removes us from sin. Most sin is venial. But some sins are serious and separate us from the body of Christ. That's where the confessor is there to help sort it out. Missing Mass is serious, but what if a person is not able to drive, sick, traveling without access to a car, or not of the age to drive? (My biggest pet peeve is a child confessing they missed Mass, they haven't don't anything wrong at all unless our new drivers age is 8). Stealing is serious but there's a difference between embezzlement in the thousands and stealing a dollar. And with some sins of the flesh, the Church permits an Act of Contrition if a person can't make it to confession. Again, there isn't an orthodoxy test but follow your conscience and if in doubt, ask a priest, we are here to help!

4) Welcome visitors and joyful noise. One of the things I love about Saint Joe's is how welcoming this parish is. My parents have visited a number of times and have always felt welcome. I hear joyful noise of toddlers in the sanctuary and how great that is! Parents bringing their kids to Mass, explaining what is going on, setting that foundation. So wonderful. I haven't yet had someone say to me "the person next to me

made me feel unwelcome because of my child.” God bless the vocation of marriage and parenthood. Sometimes not all are welcome though in Catholic churches. Believe it or not, I had a visitor present me with a letter once from their pastor; they were from a foreign country and the letter said “these people are in good standing as Catholics.” Why would that even be necessary? It is for priests but it shouldn’t be for a visitor. Hopefully we can make all truly feel welcome and strive to continue what we do.

5) To stay or not to stay? I remember our liturgy professor at seminary once remarking we have a closing hymn because we feel the need to be like the Protestants. And he’s right. If you think about it, the deacon or priest has just said “go in peace,” a Minnesota nice way of saying “time to leave, Mass is over” or as my professor put it “get out.” Of course he was being humorous but the point is anyone is welcome to stay as long as they like. It’s a great time to meditate in silence, to give thanks to God for receiving Holy Communion, to pray about the week ahead, etc. But it is no way required. As Fr. Paul Jarvis said to me when I arrived he said the one thing you’ll notice here is that everyone likes to stay after Mass. I heard this originated in the 70s to pray for soldiers in Vietnam, and someone else said it originated at another point, but I’m not sure I’ll never know the answer. Now, I’d never say “hey don’t stay after Mass” but I would say if you’d like to stay, stay, but if you are ever in a situation thinking “well I wasn’t going to stay but everyone else is staying and I don’t know why they are but people will look at me if I leave even though the deacon just said to leave so I better stick around until that first person gets up because don’t want to be first then I can get up” you are free to leave. Mass has indeed ended, so go in peace sooner or later, but it’s up to you.

As a closing thought, if you are reading this, thank you. Not for reading my column, but thank you for taking your faith seriously, because you had to come to Mass to get this bulletin. Thank you for living out your faith. Thank you for being a Catholic and part of Christ’s Church.

As a priest I’ve had people give me observations too over the years, and I’ve incorporated them at times too. My favorite was the first grader at Holy Name who said I used “big words” in homilies. I’ve hopefully worked on that a bit. Like all of us, I am a work in progress. And that’s why Mass is so important, it fine tunes me and helps me as I strive to become a saint, and I hope it does the same for you.

God bless and have a great week!

Fr. Paul