

No Doubt About it, Mass Helps us on our Lifelong Journey

It was a great sight to see so many people come out for Mass last week. Though not as full as Easter Sunday morning, the sanctuary was beautifully lit with candles for our vigil, and Easter Sunday brought about 1700 plus souls to Mass. Much better than the 10 of us from two years ago. Hopefully normalcy is returning for good now.

But how about if a “new normal” was to get more folks to come to Mass, AND to get those who come more often to have a deeper experience and appreciation for what happens at Mass? To not give up on those who may have been away from a while? To think more deeply about why we do what we do? No, we probably won’t ever get to Christmas and Easter levels every week, but we can do much to bring more folks in, and also make sure we ourselves who go often don’t always go on “auto pilot” mode because we’ve gone to Mass for years and years.

As for getting people back, take, for instance, the diocese of Phoenix. Not too long ago, Bishop Thomas Olmsted, along with others, decided to exercise their vocation of being fishers of men and plant mustard seeds. And so, they turned to the media, and showered local TV stations with commercials inviting people to come back to the Catholic Church. They also set up a special web site, catholicscomehome.org, which features information on the Church and various testimonials of people who returned to the faith.

Thousands of inactive Catholics have come back to the Church in that diocese thanks to the TV campaign. As far as the web site, it has gotten millions of hits from all 50 states and 80 countries. Mass attendance across the diocese went up 12% over the year after the launch.

The questions I’d invite us to ponder as we continue to celebrate our Lord’s Resurrection is how do we understand what it is we do around this altar every week? Why is it that we are here? Why does Mass matter so much? How do we spread that message with the world?

For one, it opens our eyes to the Body of Christ. The Easter story reminded us again of how much God loves us; we live this out each time we are at Mass. We can’t hold onto the physical body of Christ as Thomas does in our Gospel today, but Christ gave us the gift of His Church, and the Sacraments to help us deepen our relationship with Him. If we really say “yes” and want to respond to that love, we have to share in the most intimate experience of self-giving there is that Jesus gives to us, and that is Holy Communion. This gives us grace, and brings us closer to God. But in that act, we also recognize Jesus in our brothers and sisters who share that meal with us. Holy Communion isn’t just some representation of Jesus; it is the Body and Blood, the Soul and Divinity of our Lord made present on that altar. Christ himself becomes our nourishment, and it deepens our connection with Him. But it also deepens our connection with one another. We come together to share the Body and Blood of our Lord around this table, and right before that we have the sign of peace. It’s more than just an opportunity to give the person in the pew next to you a handshake (now that those are cool again). It’s a sign that reminds us of how we are connected to each other, and as Saint John Paul II said, it reminds of “of the commitment to mutual love which is made in sharing the one bread.”

Secondly, while God loves us all equally, we each respond in to that love differently. The more we go to Mass, the more we can develop habits that make ourselves open to God's love. The more we receive Jesus, the more we hear the Word proclaimed, and the more we come together in prayer, the better disposed we can be to living out the love of God and bringing it into the world.

Finally, Mass also gives us a chance to let God talk to us. We talk in prayer to God, but we also have to do some listening too. We do this at Mass through the Liturgy of the Word. I'd invite you to do your best to pay attention to the lector and listen to the words being proclaimed and reflect upon how God may be talking to you. And when we pray the Eucharistic prayer, it is our prayer, all of us together. We pray "through Christ our Lord" because it is the prayer of Christ united with His Body, the Church. And while we may have heard those words "This is my body...this is my blood...do this in memory of me" so many times, pay close attention to them, because that is God speaking to you too. The bread does not just become any flesh. It becomes the flesh of Christ who gave himself up totally for us. The flesh of Christ who gave His life to reveal just how much God truly loves us. When we pray "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof" think about how Jesus wants to do just that, and dwell in your soul and be with you, individually, for you are loved and forgiven. And when we hear "do this in memory of me," we aren't just challenged to go to Mass but to live out the self-giving love that the Mass celebrates.

Many have looked at this week's Gospel as a confrontation with doubt, but that misses the mark. Thomas is no doubter. The word "doubt" does not even come into the passage. Let's not forget Thomas left everything behind to follow Jesus. Thomas was the one who spoke up when Jesus was going to go to Bethany, where there was the threat of Him being killed, and was the only apostle to do so saying "Let us also go to die with him." And he makes one of the most incredible professions of faith in Scripture: "My Lord and my God." His eyes see a man; his heart sees his God. Faith comes not from touching, but by Jesus offering himself to the believer. Thomas responds to that by following Jesus and giving His life for the faith.

Of course, once we ourselves have an appreciation for what happens at Mass, we need to spread the word. To invite people back to Mass. To let them know they are always welcome. To not be afraid to speak about our faith with others; to pray with others, not just for them. To not give up on that family member who hasn't been to Mass in years. To not keep the resurrection hidden, but proclaim it to the whole world. We might just be amazed at the "fish" we catch when we are willing to go out with our Lord in the boat.

Jesus has offered Himself to you and me through this beautiful gift we are given in the Church and the sacraments. So much happens at Mass. He offers Himself to you and me continually, and even if at times the love of God can seem far away, know that our religion isn't about the warm-fuzzie feeling. When those come, when we have the mountaintop experience, that's wonderful. But even when it doesn't happen, the love of our God is still there. The challenge for us is to just make sure we don't throw in the towel and look at doubt and spiritual dryness as signs that God has abandoned us, because He will never leave our side. It can be very easy to fall away from the faith and admittedly, sometimes we won't have our mind on what is happening on the altar but on the rest of the day or the week ahead. Sometimes the music won't be that uplifting, and the

homily will leave something to be desired. But no matter what, what happens on that altar will happen time and time again until the end of the world: Jesus becoming present, Jesus giving us a sign of His love, and Jesus inviting us to come forward and to have His Body and Blood come into our hearts and souls. Let that love happen by always reminding yourself no matter who you are or where you've been, your spot at the table is always ready and waiting for you. Come into the Mass, and embrace it and let it transform you. Don't just come to punch a clock and fulfill an obligation, but truly let God's love help make you who have been called to be: someone who, at the end of their journey, will be in heaven in the love of our God forever, with Thomas, not a doubter, but a questioner and a saint. And proclaim the resurrected Christ to all people.

Have a blessed Easter Season!

Fr. Paul