

THE MASS

Lesson One: A Privileged Encounter

Introduction:

Catholics today are inarguably better educated than at any other time in history. Many of us hold advanced degrees which rival those of our prelates – unlike past centuries. Some of the laity have a more precise understanding and formation in the Christian faith than their priests and deacons in the pulpit, whose seminary formation during the latter half of the 20th century may have been lacking in some essentials, for the sake of social justice, liberation theology and other important trends. Gone forever are the days where our greatest instructions in the faith came from stained glass, paintings, and statues.

But ask these well educated, well informed Catholics what is happening during the Mass, and their answers will often be disheartening. Some will say “It’s a meal”, or “It’s a gathering in order to ‘be Church’”, and although partially correct, it’s far from the whole story. Too many will say “It’s a symbolic representation of the Last Supper”, which is totally inaccurate, and probably contributed to the statistic given by Bishop Barron that only 20-25% of Catholics attend Mass regularly. And for purposes of this study “regularly” means at least once a month!

If Catholics believe the Mass is merely a meal or a memorial, it makes sense that people stay away. Who bothers to worship what they perceive to be a lifeless idea or symbol, or as G.K.Chesterton wrote: “One more thing flowing passively along within the steady stream of other dead things”?

Why Do We Seek The Living Among The Dead?

Human beings cautiously avoid what is dead: we instead naturally gravitate to those experiences that exude life – a good football game, a great concert, hip-hop dancers on a street corner, the beauty of the Grand Canyon, or a major city. Something similar happens to Catholics, as we come to understand that nothing is more thoroughly, dazzlingly alive than Jesus Christ risen, and that His True Presence is effected for our worship and adoration – our spiritual sustenance – during the liturgy of The Mass.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that “Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas and moralisms: Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story, an event.” Nowhere is this encounter more concentrated than within the Mass, where the veil which separates God and Man is its thinnest. And at the moment of consecration dissolves, and Christ becomes fully present among us. Misunderstandings as to what is actually taking place, and desperate attempts to enforce what should be naturally desired, have contributed to an unwillingness of many Catholics to expend their energy on what they see as a “meal” or a “gathering”, or worse, a “symbol”. Or as Father Richard Rohr boldly states “When the Mass became a Sunday obligation, it ceased being a living encounter with God, for many of us.”

In this series, Bishop Barron seeks to counter those misunderstandings held by many of us; those who stay away, and those who remain in the pews, but aren't always sure why. Equipped with the tools and encouragement he presents in this series, the hope is that many more of us will be better able to continue the work of the New Evangelization, and the priesthood of the laity.

Mystery, Participation, and Play:

In this opening video we are shown three distinct, yet connected aspects of The Mass.

- 1.) The Mass is a Mystery – in fact a whole series of mysteries –from the gathering processional to the final blessing. As human beings we are created to be drawn to mystery. Our natural curiosity cannot resist seeking to more fully understand that which can never be fully comprehended;
- 2.) The Mass is an Encounter. The more we understand the eternal events taking place in our midst, we have a natural instinct to gather, and join in on whatever is happening before us;
- 3.) The Mass is the ultimate form of “play”, or as Bishop Barron says: “It’s the most thoroughly useless thing we can ever do.” That sounds like a denigrating remark, especially to our 21st century utilitarian minds, but he explains it well in this video.

In Psalm 85, David prophetically speaks to the meeting of God and man found during every Mass:

Love and Truth will meet;
Justice and Peace will kiss.
Truth will spring forth from the earth;
Justice will look down from heaven.

In fact, the Mass is where the kiss and courtship between Christ the Bridegroom, and his Bride the Church finds its consummation. It is the ultimate marriage covenant, or as Pope Benedict writes in his “Love Letter” of Lent, 2007:

On the cross, God’s Eros for us is made manifest. Eros is indeed that force which does not allow the lover to remain within himself, but moves him to become one with his beloved. Is there a more “mad Eros” than that which led the Son of God to make himself one with us, even to the point of suffering – as his own - the consequences of our offenses? Dear brothers and sisters, let us look at Christ pierced on the cross! He is the unsurpassing revelation of God’s love, a love in which Eros and Agape, far from being opposed, enlighten each other. On the cross, it is God himself who begs the love of his creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us.

Or as Jesus proclaims in the Gospel of John:

In a little while the world will no longer see me. But you will see me because I live, and you will also live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Is It Easier To Do or To Be?

We recall the incident in the gospel of Luke, where Jesus is spending time with Lazarus and his family and friends. Martha is the busy one: she is serving, directing, and probably catching bits and pieces of the conversation as she moves about. Mary on the other hand is characterized as being quiet, extremely attentive, and focused on The Lord's words, as she sits at His feet. Martha says "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me out." Instead, Jesus beckons her to "take a shot" at simply "being" for a while. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her."

How often have we experienced this at a family gathering or major event, or even during a vacation, when we become so busy that we forget to put down the camera, or the serving tray, or the agenda, and simply "be" a part of what is happening? How many times have we felt at the end of it all that we somehow "missed the whole thing?"

As a Eucharistic Minister, and singing in the choir, it is especially challenging for me at times to remember to stop "doing" at times and start "being". I try to especially remind myself of this during the gospel reading, the homily, and the consecration. Often time though I miss the readings, the psalm, and even am distracted during communion, with other "duties". That's why I LOVE weekday Mass. Nothing to do but Play!

Chesterton reminds us "The true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task-garden: heaven is a playground." Work is a means to an end, but play is done only for the sake of itself. Play is what makes life worth living, and thus has a higher value.

That is the value of the Mass; the reality of heaven is tantalizingly comprehensible to us, as we join with saints and angels in rightly worshipping God, as He intended from the beginning. I often think of me days in the evangelical churches – where Sunday service was exciting, entertaining, emotional, and informative. It was a means to an end for me, and I was sure that good service pleased God. Then one day – reading Genesis Chapter 4, and comparing it to Revelation Chapters 4 and 5 – I began to understand that no matter how much I felt like I was truly worshipping, what really matters is how God wants to be worshipped. The Mass is the joining of what happens eternally in heaven, with what God intends His people to participate in on earth.

Or, as Blessed John Henry Newman writes:

"To me, nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overcoming, as the Mass. It is not a mere form of words – it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth. It is not merely the invocation, but – if I can use the word – the evocation of the Eternal."