



Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

The Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

A PRIMER for CLUELESS CATHOLICS



Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Part I

We are Clueless

IMPORTANT FOREWORD:

If you can find a Traditional Latin Mass in your diocese (the Tridentine Mass of or prior to 1962, prior to the many unfortunate changes and liturgical abuses common to nearly every Mass celebrated in the vernacular subsequent to Vatican II) ... we have one suggestion: **GO!** Find one. If you have experienced little of sanctity ... and much in the way of silliness ... if you have encountered (wo)man more than you have encountered God ... if you have left as empty as you had arrived ... go to a Tridentine Latin Mass. If you were born after 1960 you will experience something you have never before encountered; something of unutterable beauty, sanctity, solemnity, and ceremony that your forbears knelt before for over 1500 years.

You will find God.

Absolutely everything, every gesture, every act, is directed to God Who is the sole focus of the Most Holy Sacrifice that we call the Mass — and not to a music “Ministry” or a priest as an entertainer— most often a comedian — who demand your applause ... at the foot of the crucified Christ. If you have never really and truly experienced *the utterly sacred* and have no idea what it means, what that experience is ... the experience of proximity to God Himself ... go to a Tridentine Latin Mass! Your life in, with, and through Christ will never be the same again. You will come to know what “worship” *really* is ... and how very different it is from the many forms of self-adulation that you have encountered in every

vernacular Mass (no two are exactly alike). Instead of the exaltation of man, you will find the exaltation of God — and come to realize the vast gulf between the two and the paltry exchange that has been traded off when man chose to worship God on his own terms and sought, in some sad way, to share the very Throne with Him.

For those who cannot find a Latin Tridentine Mass, or whose bishop or pastor deliberately suppresses it — we offer the following as a way of attending the vernacular Mass without losing your faith as a consequence of it:

Continuing with Part 1:

Admit it ...

You haven't the foggiest idea what is going on during Mass. You may not even know why you're there. The reasons are many:

- It's what Catholics do and I am Catholic.
- I want my kids to grow up in this tradition that comes from my parents, grandparents, and forebears throughout the 2000 years preceding my coming into this world through them.
- It is something good to do and it is holy ... although *why* it is good and *why* it is holy remains a mystery to me.
- My friends go ... although they do not know why either.
- I need God's help, and if I go to Mass, He will look favorably on me.
- God is there ... although just *how* He is there, I do not understand — after all, God is everywhere, right? — so why is *this place* so special?

Do not be ashamed. It is not your fault. There are answers — good answers — for all the questions this short list brings up. **You were never taught.**

It is really that simple. No one took the time to sit down and talk with you about what is **the most important event in your life** — and it occurs every 7 days. In fact, whatever else you do during the other 167 hours of the week (job, school, charity —

in fact, every other responsibility, necessity, or good work) however good, kind, lofty, and noble, pales in significance to the Mass.

The Basics:

Before you go further in this brief study — and it is *a study* that we invite you to — of *the single most important thing in your life*, we must make a promise to you first: it will not be dry or boring, nor will it be fraught with meaningless pieties and sentiments. You will understand *what* the Mass is, *why* it is holy, and *why* you must be there. This is our promise to you.

It will not be “socially correct”, sanitized to sensitivities, or keeping in step with the passing fads that blow through the pews and across the Altars as so many shifting winds following that elusive mantra of “what is the latest fad”. There is perpetuity in the Church, and unchangeable elements of the Mass. Hopefully, we will enable you to see beyond the Mass so often presented as *entertainment*, hosted by an *entertainer*, to the deep and very sacred reality within it. “The Mass”, as we most often call it, is really short for, **“The Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass”**.

Linger a moment on those seven words, for they contain quite nearly everything that you will need to know in order to understand why you go to Church, or why you ought to. The Mass, first and foremost, *is a Sacrifice*. Not a figurative sacrifice, not a mere remembrance of something done long ago, and not a metaphor. It is a real sacrifice. At Mass you are witnessing — even *participating in* — a sacrifice, very real and very present. Does that surprise you?

We do not hear very much about this — but unless we understand this most fundamental, *this absolutely central aspect of the Mass*, nothing else makes sense. Our lack of understanding the Mass as a Sacrifice contributes to most of the confusion that surrounds our going there and being there. But what, exactly, is the nature of this Sacrifice, and how is it enacted? Who does the sacrificing and who or what is sacrificed? How do we ourselves participate in it?

What we have learned today: The Mass is a Sacrifice

Part II: A Sacred Darkness

So far, we have learned this: that the **Mass is primarily a *Sacrifice***.

Unless we begin to grasp this, we can go no further. We are, as it were, standing at the door looking in, aware that we are in the vestibule of something deeply sacred. Beyond the doors we will encounter something that we have never experienced in our lives: the Sacrifice — not of bread and wine; not even a merely “commemorative,” still less a “symbolic,” Sacrifice. **No.** We will witness the Sacrifice of a Human Being.

We will witness death.

As in most things of great importance, our eyes will betray us. You know well of what I am speaking: The world of “appearances” that surrounds us so often as a lie. It is among the greatest of paradoxes that *we are blinded by our sight, and given sight by our blindness*. Things are so seldom what they appear to be: the fluted columns of “marble” within most Churches are really plaster, and the voice that greets you in kindness in the vestibule may well calumniate you as soon as you leave. Our eyes tell us that this man is sinful and that woman pious, seeing nothing of the humility in the one and the pride in the other. How much *love*, and how much *malice*, is concealed from our eyes. Why, the very sky itself is not blue, but only appears so.

At the door of the Church, you enter, or ought to enter, a sacred darkness. The world lies without. God lies within. Appearances must fall away the moment you anoint yourself with the Holy Water and sign yourself with the Cross. The world has passed. You have entered another dimension in which time itself is anointed with eternity. Your eyes will avail you nothing here. Here they will distract you, vex you, call you to your neighbor and away from God. Your ears will not be deafened by a sacred

silence, but will contend with a thousand words that have no place in Church and in the presence of the Living God.

The only one who will not compete for your attention is God. The humility of God is stunning.

To Whom have you come this day? To God. Where is He?

No, He is not upon the Altar. Not yet. Nor is He in the statues, if any remain. He is not even on the Crucifix ... at least not yet.

But He is here. No, no ... not in the mindless aphorism that "God is everywhere." He is truly here. He has deigned to come to a place, a specific place, and to dwell there in utter humility; a place before which you can actually kneel, lift up your face, close your eyes, and look upon Him. ... as He looks upon you. He confines Himself for you, because He knows your littleness.

"But where?" you ask with incredulity. "Where is the Living God, that I may be before Him?" How this can be you will soon understand, but right now it is only important that you realize that He is there — right before you. Not symbolically, not metaphorically — but Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, He is there! As really and truly as I would be, could I stand before you. You could ... in fact, you will ... even touch Him!

The difference between His being there before you, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity — and His being absent from you — is the blink of an eye ... an eye that sees not upon opening, but closing. It is the difference that Mary, the Mother of God, experienced as she stood at the foot of the Cross and closed her eyes in her unfathomable grief ...

Was Jesus still on the Cross before her as she closed her eyes?

He is no less present to you when you kneel before Him ... and close your eyes ...

Where?

In the Tabernacle ... in that little gold House of the Living God within which He dwells really

and truly ... in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar ... under what only appears to be a humble Host; what, to the eyes, is only bread. Bread? Yes, Bread! “The Bread of Angels that has come down from Heaven” and which to eat is life everlasting (St. John 6:48-52). **He is there!**



You will find the Tabernacle behind the Altar – or, sadly, often shunted off to the side, but if you look carefully, you will find it, and when you find it, you will find Him! Most often it has a little door (for Him Who is “the Gate”) upon which two engraved angels face each other in adoration of Him within. But they are made merely of gold. You are made in the very image of God!

Do no less than the angels ... and adore Him Who awaits you there.

- What we have learned today: JESUS CHRIST is really and truly present, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – as really as you or me in the Tabernacle ... under the appearance of Bread ... *He is there!*

What we have learned today: JESUS CHRIST is *really and truly* present, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity — as really as you or me in the Tabernacle ... under the appearance of Bread ...

He is there!

Part III:

“I Don’t Think We’re in Kansas Anymore, Toto”

So, we have discovered that HE IS THERE. From the beginning of time men and women have sought God. Today we seek Him still ... and we have found Him. You have entered the Church and are about to pass beyond, as it were, the gates that lead to the vestibule of Heaven ... which is timeless.

Beyond those doors you will encounter, as much as is possible in this life, something very like Heaven where the past, the future, and the eternal are present. History, understood as something past – as events that once occurred but have receded into a frame of time no longer available to us – is, or soon will be, gathered up into the present and be enacted once again before you. It is not that the present time has left us, as that the present has penetrated the past, and the past the present, so that we can no longer speak of some things that once occurred (although they did occur at some definite point in history, in time), but only of things occurring now, here, presently, immediately before us. The past, in a very real sense, becomes present to us – not as a memory, but as a present reality.

Do you remember the sequence in the “Wizard of Oz” in which Dorothy's house is swept up in a tornado, spun relentlessly in the furious skies, and dropped suddenly, not in Kansas from which it was uprooted, but in the Land of Oz? Dorothy approaches the door warily. Up to that point in the movie, all is in black and white – and then ... as Dorothy opens the door, beyond which lies the new world, a effulgence of magnificent color is revealed to her, pours in upon her. It is a world of recognizable things, by and large, but they are suddenly invested with unspeakable life and color and beauty. Hidden from her eyes, however, at least at first, are the people who dwell there, the yet unseen.

This is a metaphor for your standing before the doors that lead into Church, into the place where the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will be enacted, celebrated. You leave the whirlwind of the world behind you, and all the gray and lifeless things that

accompany you every day of the week except this day. Beyond the door is a new world, a world of things unseen by the eyes – but a strange inversion occurs. With eyes wide in astonishment, Dorothy opened the door and entered a new world.

With us, that new world of unspeakable life and beauty will be revealed to us ... when we close our eyes.

As the eyes of the body close, the eyes of faith open.

And what they will see, discover to us, reveal, will touch the fiber of our being ... and more than touch it, transform it!

- **What we have learned today:** **The Mass is Timeless**

Part IV: The Road to Golgotha

We had just said that, “With us, that new world of unspeakable life and beauty will be revealed ... when we close our eyes. As the eyes of the body close, the eyes of faith open. And what they will see, discover to us, reveal, will touch the fiber of our being ... and more than touch it, transform it!”

How so?

Once you begin to understand where you are – really and truly – a change, a profound change, will begin to occur within you. You will be unable to prevent it. Initially – even necessarily – it will come to you through your understanding, and as you enter more deeply into the realization of where you are, your understanding itself will begin to be eclipsed by something deeper still, by something more vital.

Understanding will "tell" you where you are – but faith will take you beyond the appearances, to the realities beneath them. The change that will come will occur within you – not in the appearances of things about you. You will have changed. But as we had also said, before any of this occurs, you must first understand what is happening before you – and it is this, and nothing less than this: Jesus Christ is being crucified before you. He is on the Cross! And you are witnessing it. You are even taking part in it!

It is not another Sacrifice, but the same Sacrifice that He enacted 2000 years ago. It is not a “re-enactment” much as great battles are re-enacted for theatrical effect. It is an “enactment”, the “same” enactment, **re-presented** to us (not “*represented*” to us, but “**re-presented**”) to us ... enacted again while not being a second or another sacrifice. It is the same Sacrifice, with one exception: it is unbloody ... just as it

was unbloody when He gathered His Apostles around Him at the very first Mass on the night He was betrayed and before He was crucified:

“The day before He suffered he took bread in His sacred hands and looking up to heaven, to you, His almighty Father, He gave you thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to His disciples and said: Take this, all of you and eat it: this is My body which will be given up for you. When supper was ended, He took the cup. Again He gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of My blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.”

When you passed the doors leading into the Church and toward the Sanctuary, you began to wend your way through the road that leads to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, the Mount of Crucifixion —the Altar of Sacrifice. Not unlike 2000 years ago, the people that line the way, the voices, the talking, the laughing, together with all the other things that compete for your attention as you walk that road to your pew – one and all, they will call you aside, distract you as though to call you away from a false prophet on a road well-worn and ultimately tiresome ...

Something has changed, however. This day is unlike other days. You have begun to understand ... How, then, will you enter?

- **What we have learned today:** The Mass is the enactment, really and truly present before you, of Jesus' Sacrifice on Calvary, and *you* have a very real part in it.

Part V: A Matter of Uncommon Courtesy

We had left off asking the question, “How, then, will you enter?”

You have just passed beyond the door – and immediately you come face to face with your neighbor whom you have known these many years. You look each other in the eye and then pass as though you did not see him, without saying so much as a word or making any gesture of acknowledgement whatever! Your neighbor, expecting at least the minimal courtesy, would very likely take grave offense and wonder what he had done to deserve such shabby treatment. Yes? Have you ever done this? Of course not. If you do, however, it is extremely likely that your next encounter with your neighbor will be less than cordial. What, moreover, if you had passed him by in your haste to greet, not your very next-door neighbor, but some acquaintance with whom you really have little to do, not breaking stride to at least say hello to your neighbor? What if you were that neighbor? Would you take offense? How would you account yourself, in the way of importance, in that person's life? You would say that he behaved as though he did not so much as know you! What would possibly prompt this discourtesy? Something, surely, is amiss. You have either offended him, wittingly or not — or what is more remarkable still, he had completely forgotten you.

Only one other explanation is possible, even plausible: ... despite all appearances, he did not see you! Had he, he would never have behaved so badly, treated you so poorly. Let us take it a step further. What if the person you just ignored was the very person who had invited you to his house, and it was his house that you had just

entered. He even opened the door for you, but you breezed by him to greet the other guests within ... completely heedless of your host. What could possibly

account for such odd behavior? It is either inexcusable effrontery ... or a total unawareness of who — or where — the person is who had invited you — or somehow, having arrived, you are unable to find him. I am open to other possible reasons, but can think of none off hand.

The courtesy you extend your neighbor – and remote acquaintances ... surely you would extend no less to God Himself? And yet you walk into the Church, *pass before the Tabernacle* (where Jesus Christ **is**, really and truly, remember?) and the Altar, chat with this one and that one on your way down the aisle, wave left and right, stop to accord someone a special greeting – careful to offend no one you know by failing to acknowledge them — and finally make your way to a pew, pass right in front of Jesus Christ with (and often even without) a perfunctory genuflection (the kneeling on one knee, for reasons of which you are quite unsure — it simply is done ...) you take your seat ... and begin socializing with everyone ... except Jesus Christ. Sometimes you will kneel in an attitude of prayer, careful that you do not pray too long or appear too pious, utter a few words by rote ... and then get back to business: socializing while you await; not to enter the most significant event of all time which will be enacted before you, but to be entertained ... hoping that the priest today will be not so much a model of sanctity as an engaging entertainer who will have a well provisioned stock of good jokes and cute anecdotes, and above all, who will make you laugh and feel terribly good about yourself for deigning, this day, to bring yourself to God's Presence.

There is a beautiful verse from the Book of Psalms that is lilting with alliteration, and very apropos of this day;

“Deus sedet super sedem sanctam Suam” God sits upon His holy throne. (Psalm 46.9)

The problem, however, is that the throne is right before you – and He Who sits upon it — and you do not know! Or worse yet, if knowing, behave toward Him as you did to the neighbor we spoke of earlier whom you first met at the door.

“If ...” (an unerring test of your Faith)

If Jesus stood before you – visible to your eyes, as you walked up the aisle toward the Altar and your pew – would you behave any differently than you do at this moment when He is hidden from your eyes? Would you chat and gossip with your neighbors? Would you fail to bow before Him as you passed right in front of His eyes? ... and once seated, turn your attention away from Him to more ... important ... people around you, discussing events more important than Him and which have nothing to do with Him? If you saw with your eyes, you know that this would not be so. Still ... still you fail to grasp that **HE IS THERE** in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar — and expects at least some measure of the courtesy you lavish upon lesser beings.

• **What we have learned today:** God is present in the Most Blessed Sacrament ... and should be accorded at least the Courtesy of Recognition. After all, He is the Host, and you are the guest ... and the House is His. Remember?

Part VI: “I Die with Thee, O, Christ ...!”

When you assist at Mass (for that is what you are really doing, you are actively “assisting”, not passively “attending”, as we so often say), you have a very real part and a very real place in the drama that is about to unfold before you, a drama into which you will be called, not as a spectator, but as a participant. A participant in what? In the Passion, Crucifixion, and Death of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Really? Really. The only difference between your being actually present at the foot of the Cross outside the walls of Jerusalem 2000 years ago, next to Mary, St. John and the

Magdalene – and your being present at the Altar before which you kneel at Church during the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is this: the mere closing of your eyes! It is the difference — the very same difference — that Mary, that St. John, and that the Magdalene experienced when they, too, closed their eyes at the foot of the Cross upon which Jesus hung before them. Did He cease to be on the Cross when they closed their eyes and could physically see Him no more? Did Jesus disappear? Go away? Cease to be? The skin covering their eyes, your eyes, my eyes, is the thinnest epidermal membrane (0.05 mm thin) in the human body. But it was – it still is – sufficient to conceal Him from us.

In the case of Mary, John, and the Magdalene, it concealed Him when their eyelids closed. In our case, it conceals Him when they are open! His presence was revealed to them when their eyes were opened. It is only revealed to us when our eyes are closed. In both instances it is not the case that He was there – and in the blink of an eye is no more – but that He is there! At the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we are present at the death of Christ. We are present at His crucifixion! It is happening before us! How many times have we said, “Oh, would that I were there!

... there to stand before Him ... to share in His Passion, to stand at His feet ...!” You are! But even more than present at this Sacrifice, we participate in it, and we do so in a two-fold manner:

- through our sins for which and by which He was crucified –
- and we die with Him on this Cross of our own making!

Through our Baptism, we must remember, we were baptized not only into His life, but also into His death! For this reason, Archbishop Fulton Sheen once so poignantly said that each of us should, at the Elevation (the moment when the Priest lifts up of the Host that is Christ's Body, the Chalice that is Christ's Blood – when He holds up Jesus Christ Himself, in the most perfect offering to the Father –, saying, “Through Him, With Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all glory and honor is Yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever” — that at that moment we should, from our hearts, from the depths of our being, utter in all truth: *“I die with Thee, O Christ, on Calvary!”*

- **What we have learned today:** We are active participants in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, actually standing at the foot of the Cross.

Part VII: A Matter of Proximity

Not very long ago, hundreds of people flocked to see what appeared to be an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary ... in the condensation that had occurred upon a window at a local hospital in Boston. Some came from great distances. Many came as long as the image appeared, and, being interviewed on local television news, expressed no doubt about the authentic and “miraculous” nature of such a thing as they continue to marvel at the image, pondering its significance. In yet another instance, a tree growing somewhere in the Southern United States had resembled the profile of Our Blessed Lord, and thousands came to gaze upon the tree. In a similar way, people, many thousands, have gone, and continue to go, to Medjugorje, to a place where, they believe, Mary has appeared for the past 30 years (about 10,000 -15,000 times) ... to a group of (then) young people in 1981, conversed with them, and, they claim, still does to this day. They have gone in the hopes of seeing their Rosaries turn to gold, or to witness some other inexplicable phenomena that will, for them, validate their faith, or enable them to return home with some account of the miraculous that they themselves had witnessed, and in so doing entering into an inner circle of the privileged and the elect to whom such extraordinary graces are given, graces that are not dispensed to the many.

This is not to say that some good has not come from condensation on glass, or the shape of a tree, or a Rosary appearing to turn to gold for a moment or two. To my understanding, no one has brought back a Rosary that has remained gold; the condensation has evaporated, and the tree has acquired new branches and leaves and

now resembles something quite different and more akin to ... well ... a tree. We flock to the miraculous and the extraordinary, not because we believe in miracles, but I think because we do not and wish to (although as Catholics, we must). We want the evidence.

Like King Herod, before whom Christ was brought on the night of His Passion, we demand a miracle, hard copy, *proof* — which, of course, would make faith unnecessary. We needn't have faith in something proven to us, in things evident.

We do not understand ourselves as having faith in gravity. We do not need it. An ill-placed step on a stairway suffices to remind us. The Apostle Thomas wanted proof and got it. But at the price of a lesser blessing (St. John 20.24-29).

What has this to do with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

Consider this — not *ex hypothesi*, but as an actual event: You are sitting at home when a neighbor bursts into the door and breathlessly exclaims that Jesus Christ has just appeared down the street — and He is still there! You look up in amazement, incredulous before your neighbor. In a trice you grab the keys to your car and speed off down the street, heedless of all else, hoping to get to the place where you will find Jesus Christ Himself! You've left the water boiling for your tea, the door open, and the television still on ... in fact, you realize as you are speeding along that you've even forgotten to put on your shoes! Who cares? If this is real, you would have fled your house naked grabbing a towel on the way. You eventually come to where your friend had told you that Jesus is — and there is nothing and no one. You are furious! You speed back even more quickly to scold your erstwhile friend for sending you on a wild goose chase. He is still back at your house, standing in the driveway. Barely able to restrain yourself from parking precisely where he is standing, you fling open the door to your car and jump out, full of indignation!

Your friend is astonished. “He was there when I left”, he cries. “Are you certain that you went to the right place?” He hops in your car and back you go. Then, coming to the Church, he tells you to stop! “Come along!”, he urges you, impatiently. You get out and follow him through the door of the Church, barely

able to keep pace with your friend, and then, at the end of the aisle, before the Tabernacle, he stops.

You look around. The Church is empty. You look at your friend, utterly bewildered ... but he has fallen to the floor on his face in front of the Most Blessed Sacrament. And you are left standing ... and still you do not understand.

Herod believed in miracles too ... or *wanted to* — *even* as the Author of all miracles stood before him. (St. Luke 23.8)

- **What we have learned today:** If truly we believe, we would hasten to the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar – where Jesus really and truly IS ... hidden under the appearance of mere bread.

Part VIII: What the Mass is NOT

By now we should have acquired a fairly clear idea of what the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass principally **IS**.

It is no less important for us first be clear about **what the Mass is NOT**, for a good deal of what the Mass *is* will become much more clear if we understand what the Mass *is not*. Most Catholics, as Pope John Paul II noted, have either lost, or no longer have remembrance of, the most central aspects of the Mass — and the fault, largely, is not their own. It is the result of a systemic failure in Catechesis over the past 60 years. Bishops — whose principal duty, *above all other duties*, as “teachers of the faith” — appear to have forgotten, or have simply relinquished, this *absolutely vital responsibility*, relegating it to others as something of a “less pressing” issue, failing to see that the “larger” issues at hand are an immediate and direct result of this failure.

Doctrine and Dogma vs. Doctrinaire Dissent

Having been pawned off to — and eagerly seized by — increasingly doctrinaire and “progressive” committees who articulated Catholic teaching not in terms of the genuine Deposit of Faith, but in terms of social and political issues — largely liberal and distinctly feminist — current or correct at the time, the concept itself of “doctrine and dogma” came into disrepute, such that the words themselves became terms of reproach and disdain. In fact, “doctrine and dogma” became the antithesis to endless “enlightened experiment,” which, disdaining doctrinal certainties as somehow regressive, eventually came to repudiate them — however catastrophic the results and however detrimental to the Faith ... and to the faithful.

Indeed, we ourselves are not without blame. Unwilling to accept, or even to recognize our own complicity in the matter **through our failure to be “the primary teachers of our children”** — as the Church insists — the reproach that we legitimately lay on the doorsteps of our “Religious Educators” and Catechists is no less an indictment of our own irresponsibility. It is profoundly true, unfortunately, that the Catechists to whom we entrust our children had themselves acquired little in the way of authentic Catholic doctrine from their own predecessors who themselves were largely ignorant of the authentic teachings of the Church and the Deposit of the Faith ... or disagreeing with much of it, deliberately failed to teach what did not conform to their own partisan commitment to prevailing social, sexual, and gender-related issues. It is equally true that we, as parents, indeed, as Catholics, have been resolutely indifferent to learning many of the most basic tenets of our own Faith.

Our own indifference, together with the ignorance or the dissent (or both) of the Catechists and the “professional” Religious Educators — nevertheless remain a direct consequence of **the inexcusable negligence of the bishops** ... to whom Christ entrusted us as children to “a father.”

The problem, however, is that the “father” is remote, indifferent, and largely absentee. He has washed his hands of what his children are learning, and appears indifferent to what they are being taught. In this sense, the bishop appears to have taken his cue from the majority of secular fathers with children in public education.

Uninvolved and ill-informed, he knows little or nothing of what they are being taught, however destructive it may be to the fabric of the family.

By the time the child comes home in confusion because he has been prompted to question his own sexual identity the damage has already been done ... and very often cannot be undone. “If only I had been more proactive, more informed, more involved in my son’s or daughter’s education, this terrible situation would never have occurred.” But he laments too late, and he knows it.

Something very similar occurred within the seminaries of the Archdiocese of Boston — and at what cost in every way! The negligence and indifference of the bishops exacted a terrible and lasting tribute. Just as it has within the classrooms of virtually every Catechism class (now known as “Religious Education” classes — being neither in any significant way).

So what is the point of all this? We know little of our Faith, and therefore even less of the momentous event that occurs each day at our Altars.

While this may appear an unkind assessment, it is sadly borne out by the appalling lack of knowledge of even the most elementary aspects of the Catholic Faith by our own children. From First Penance to Confirmation they are “processed”, grade by grade, to “Confirming” that of which they know nothing because they have been taught nothing.

This absence of what authentically constitutes Catholic doctrine has created a vacuum in the Mass. We celebrate it and really do not know why. Most often we appear, really, to be celebrating ourselves.

The True, the Untrue, and the Absurd

In this vacuum, it comes as no surprise that certain things practiced – or left undone – things that have become part and parcel of our experience at Mass – really have no place there. This can be a stinging realization. No one likes being told that they behave badly or without understanding — that what they have long practiced and what has been long condoned and even encouraged, is wrong. In this respect we all lack humility. We do not like being “wrong.”

Nevertheless, it remains the case that some things are true and others are not – however this vies with or offends our largely democratically evolved sensitivities that would hold the true to be what best suits the most or the many, or, perhaps better yet, what is least offensive to them. This notion pleases us.

No one is wrong. In fact, nothing is wrong. And if nothing is wrong, nothing, *eo ipso*, is intrinsically right. We have the best of all possible worlds. Truth, absurdity, contradiction – all are concomitant, but ultimately lesser issues. We wish to get along. And we do so by “going along.”

In fact, the most certain formula for contention, for not “getting along,” is to insist that $2+2=4$ and **not** another number of *our choosing*. Our insistence that the sum of this simple equation is 4, and cannot be 5, is surprisingly fraught with deep implications, for it means that the world is not arbitrary — at least the world of numbers, and with the world of numbers, the world of matter as susceptible to quantification of any meaningful sort. If we pay for two apples and receive one, we are not indifferent to it. But there is an inherent tyranny in equations of this sort, and, in fact, in any physical phenomena construed in terms of “laws”, in other words, as sequences or configurations that do, because they cannot, admit of exceptions. We are both constrained and confined by them. People do not like mathematics, not because it is abstruse, but because it admits of definitive and unequivocal answers. There are correct and there are incorrect answers. There are right answers and there are wrong answers — and this *infuriates* us. There is no latitude. We cannot fake the right answer. And that burns us. It provokes us because it violates our freedom. It constrains our will. Do you doubt it?

State something categorically ... and a hand will immediately rise to challenge it. We esteem this. It is part and parcel of our “democratic” patrimony and our allegiance to it *even at the cost of reason*. The *will to dissent*, has, in the West, come to verge upon the pathological such that the unwillingness to dissent has come to acquire a pathology of its own: “What?”, we are asked incredulously, “You do not question? *What is wrong with you?*”

If we are honest, however, we will admit that often our challenge has little to do with a genuine questioning at all, but is an expression of a contention with our will

which we perceive threatened by being deprived of its freedom to choose otherwise. Dostoyevsky, in his famous *Notes from Underground*, stated it more succinctly: “To me, 2 plus 2 making four is sheer insolence”.

Would that the Moon were Green Cheese

However much it may pique us, however “undemocratic” or “incorrect” it may be, it nevertheless remains that some things are simply the case, and some things are not; some things are right and some things are wrong — that some things are true and some things are not — irrespective of their pleasing or displeasing us. We cannot make them other than they are simply because they do not, and intrinsically *cannot*, comply with our will or conform to our sensitivities. However much we *will* a triangle to have four sides, it will remain, withal, a three-sided figure. There is, in short, an ontological intolerance that is indifferent to our desiderations — and *if there is one thing that we will not tolerate, it is intolerance ...*

Absurdity may perplex us, but it does not offend us. **Truth** offends us. It vies with our *will* and is not amenable to it ... especially when it does not accord with our will.

So, what does that have to do with the Moon as green cheese and the Mass as the Sacrifice on Calvary?

It is a prologue to some things that are, and some things that are not — despite our wishing them to be otherwise. Let us look at some of these things in the way of the Mass and what it is NOT (in order to understand what it really *is*):

THE MASS IS NOT:

- Entertainment
- A social
- A musical (“The employment of the piano is forbidden in Church, as is also that of noisy or frivolous instruments such as drums, cymbals, bells, and the like”

- A comedy
- A talent show
- Your gift to God in an act of personal munificence and sacrifice for which God should be grateful ...
- A liturgical and linguistic laboratory
- A mere remembrance of something done long ago
- A mere ritual, albeit a very ancient one
- Optional

None of the above is even remotely connected to the Mass. To better understand this, imagine the following scenario:

Jesus Christ, hanging on the Cross, is being crucified before you. He is *dying*! His hair is matted with blood from the Crown of Thorns and His face is bruised from the blows of the Roman soldiers and covered with spit from all who mock Him. He is disrobed and open to shame. Even as the blood continues to issue from too many lacerations to count from the Scourging at the Pillar an hour before and the nails

hold fast against the flesh yielding under the weight of the cruciform Figure, He is crying out in agony to His Father. Mary, His Mother, is standing before Him crying inconsolably, and would crumple to the ground were she not borne up by John and Mary Magdalene. They are weeping uncontrollably, too. All around, pious women are weeping and wailing, men are sobbing and jeering. It is a scene of utter desolation, unfathomable sorrow, a torrent of tears and a torrent of taunts.

Have you grasped the scene? ***This*** is what is being enacted before you at the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Now ***we*** arrive.

The electric guitars are plugged in, the drum and trap set are being set up, and the piano is being tuned. The acoustic guitars are being strummed aimlessly, and the flute trills sporadically in the background. There is chattering intermingled with

laughter among the musicians. They are preparing to **entertain** the sobbing women, the raging men, and the indifferent spectators looking on. The entertainment is about to begin and the musician cordially welcomes us to the Crucifixion. *Throughout the Mass they will **compete** with Jesus Christ on the Cross for our attention and adulation, calling us away from the Cross* that we made of our sins for the Son of God to hang upon, to their virtuosity as singers, guitarists, or piano players. They will entertain us ...

But we are a restless audience, and demand more than music during this drama. **We want comedy, too.** The priest accommodates us, demonstrating his own virtuosity as an entertainer. He had stood briefly at the Altar by the Cross, but is now eager to leave the summit of Golgotha altogether and to walk among his “audience”. He leaves the Sanctuary of suffering and walks the aisles and avenues

of the spectators, much in the manner of talk show hosts trying to garner the attention of the people for himself. What better way than comedy? And he is well provisioned with anecdotes and jokes ... some rather “sly” and just slightly “off-color” (“what a rascal!” we smile, as insiders of the joke with him).

There may be a “question and answer session” in the style of successful television hosts, but the point is to make you feel terribly good about *yourself*, and *him* — despite what is going on in the background — on that sad summit that he quickly left and where Christ still hangs. With the “punch-line” the skit ends, sometimes vaguely connected with what is going on with Christ, or something He said prior to His being raised on the Cross.

Still restless, the audience is once again entertained by the musicians, and they remain once the Crucifixion has been consummated and Christ is dead on the Cross ... ***awaiting our applause*** — which we extend them despite a sense of terrible incongruity with all that has happened in the background and from which we had been constantly pulled away ... lest we see or understand the consequences of our sins ... and the magnitude of Christ’s love for us.

An impolite assessment, to be sure. But a very accurate one ... nevertheless. There are, of course, many other things that the Mass is not. These are merely the more salient among them, for they are, very likely, what we encounter most often before,

during, and after Mass, in the trivializing of **the most momentous act in history that unfolds before us.**

It is true that we cannot fully comprehend what the Mass is ...

We can, however, clearly grasp what it is not ... even if we would have it otherwise.

• **What we have learned today:** *The Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the occasion of the utmost reverence. It is Holy Ground, and we stand, really and truly, before Christ crucified. Christ has died on the Cross ... and we have died with Him. And because we have died with Him, we will also rise with Him ... **not in “applause” ... but in the Resurrection.***

Geoffrey K. Mondello
Editor
Boston Catholic Journal



Copyright © 2004 - 2024 Boston Catholic Journal. All rights reserved.