

Will They Return?

The pandemic has changed our congregation. There are many familiar faces missing since last March while, at the same time, there are many new faces. I am happy that we have attracted people from the surrounding areas who have sought a new “spiritual home” because of parish closings and consolidations or, perhaps, because of relocation. But, at the same time, I wonder about the absence of families with children: Our 9:30 Mass used to be well-populated with young children who would come forward, *en masse*, for blessing at the end of the liturgy. Is it still a matter of dread fear of Coronavirus infection? Has church really been shown to be a particularly dangerous place in the pandemic?

Of course, since last March, all Catholics are under a dispensation from obligation to attend Mass due to Covid. But, to my mind, this hardly has any meaning. Obligation isn't really a category in the minds of most modern, practicing Catholics: They come because, in the words of the Mass, “**it is right and just.**” That wording is a little odd to our ears but, if we parse the terms it just means that *it is the right thing to do and the way to be in a right and proper relationship with God.*

This phrase must be understood in a communal sense rather than an individual one: God created “a people” not just a collection of individuals. An individualistic, purely personalized faith is not the Biblical faith. This is the “*I'm spiritual but not religious*” sort of phenomenon we see in our world today. It is also captured in the phrase “*I don't believe in organized religion.*”

As a pastor, I am concerned that the seductive power of secularism will change people's minds about observing the Lord's Day by attending Mass. Among these forces there is the culture of the “work week” where, in the name of efficiency, more work is heaped upon less workers and, therefore, free time is reduced and precious. Perhaps folks are discovering “*I could make more practical use of that Sunday morning time! There is yard work to do along with home improvements. And why not indulge in some relaxation?*”

This is all very understandable. We have created a very problematic work culture along with one which requires kids to be shuttled here there and

everywhere for a multitude of extracurricular activities. Something has to give. Something has to be trimmed from the weekly calendar so that there is some breathing room. And, perhaps in the thinking of some/many, it is church. After all, “*I can pray by myself! I can pray with my family members!*”

From the perspective I bring to bear in this reflection, It must be said that such a decision is to remove what is **most essential** from the calendar rather than something optional or superfluous. The Church is not a manmade reality: Properly understood, it is the very continuation of Christ Jesus in the midst of his people. For, as he says:

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I?” (Mt. 18:20)

And, elsewhere, it is said. . .

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” (1 Cor. 23:26)

And, again . . .

“We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:25)



Concerns about infection are valid and quite serious. But be wary of the spirit of this age using the situation to undermine commitment to the things of the Lord. Our worship is the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, re-presented on the altar under the signs of bread and wine and returned to us as His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity which will transform us into his likeness as the Firstborn from the Dead.