

Ten Ways to Get More Out of Mass

1. Get the lay of the liturgical land. In other words, get to know your Catholic family home that is your parish.

Stop by between Monday and Saturday when Mass is not going on. Bring your kids or grandkids along for the tour. Slowly and prayerfully engage in every element. Contemplate the crucifix. Survey the stained glass more closely. Stop to appreciate every statue. Draw near to the sanctuary and take it all in. Pause at the baptismal font to thank God for the gift of your own baptism. Kneel in humble appreciation for the Lord's perpetual presence, symbolized by the flickering red candle burning brightly beside the tabernacle. The more intentionally you "see" the church's environment with the eyes of faith and the people or purpose that each element signifies, the more deeply you'll be able to "enter into" the Mass when Christ does.

2. Be sure to read ahead.

Read all four readings—yes, all four readings (don't forget the psalm response) ahead of time. Beginning on Monday, start reading the upcoming Sunday Mass readings. Perhaps you can read all four on Monday and then again throughout the week, or maybe you can take one reading a day and journal about it. Spend time with footnotes or commentaries on each, drawing more deeply into the true meaning behind the words. Take advantage of free audio and video podcasts that are available to help you (my own free podcasts are available at biblegeek.com). Doing this not only ensures you'll know what is happening during the first half of the Mass, but it will also take away any pressure at the moment when the lector is reading. If a baby wails or your mind wanders (as happens sometimes), you needn't worry; you will have already read and studied God's word in eager anticipation of that moment. I also encourage Catholic parents to allow their children to bring their Bibles to Mass. My seven-year-old takes a

compact Bible with her to Mass every Sunday and follows along with the lector. Not only is she learning to navigate the books of the Bible, but she is more engaged in the Mass and is retaining the message far more.

3. Pack your bags.

Many say they don't get anything out of Mass, but maybe it's because they fail to first bring anything to it. Mass is a time to bring your issues, stresses, anxieties, fears, concerns, and personal baggage. Check your bags at the foot of the sanctuary! Bring a special intention with you, someone or something you want to offer up to the Lord upon his altar alongside the gifts. The Lord is offering up his very life for you. What are you willing to offer up to him so that you might follow and love him even more perfectly?

4. Get wet.

Don't just reactively reach for the holy water upon entering and exiting. Make the gesture intentional. As you reach, remember the transformative power of the sacraments. Thank God for the gift of your baptism, by which you have the privilege of being called God's son or daughter. As you trace the sign of the cross upon your body, contemplate how water brings both death and life, and consider how important it is to be covered by and filled with God's grace through the sacraments.

5. Sit up.

As in, "sit up closer." The old adage that good Catholics sit in the back might make for a well-timed punch line from Father, but ask yourself why people want front-row seats at concerts and games and the back row at Mass. The closer you can get to the sanctuary, the better view you'll have of heaven visiting earth by the power of the Holy Spirit. While you're at it, don't just sit closer to the front, but change seats frequently from one Sunday to the next. Many Catholics (my parents included) always had "their pew" over the years. The more you switch seats, however, the more you come to know your fellow parishioners as your brothers and sisters in the faith.

6. Strike a chord with God.

While they may open the hymnal, too many Catholics take the word “refrain” far too literally. If God gave you a beautiful voice, praise him with it. If God gave you a horrible voice, sing anyway. Remember that you’re not just singing; you’re lifting your voice, mind, and heart to your heavenly Father. Music doesn’t just incline the ear to God; it directs the soul back to him. St. Augustine said that when we sing, we pray twice. Set the tone for others through your example. The Mass is assuredly more than music, and many parishes can undoubtedly “do music” better, but the best way to improve it is to participate in it. If you can sing or play an instrument and haven’t yet volunteered to join the choir or music ministry, do so. Anyone can point out the problem, but only those with musical gifts can become part of the solution.

7. Go through with your heart transplant.

Are you really putting your heart upon that altar with the gifts of bread and the wine? Are you really giving God permission to have his way with you, entrusting him with your health, your finances, your job, your marriage, your children, your vocation, and your future? Are you Christ falling on your knees in the Garden of Gethsemane, heralding that the Father’s will be done, or are you one of the disciples who fell asleep? At Mass, Christ is offering you redemption, a time to exchange your tired, sin-tattered heart for his exuberant, grace-filled sacred heart. Take him up on his offer upon the altar. Give God permission to transform your heart, not just the gifts.

8. Say it like you mean it.

Extend a hand or a kiss of peace as though it’s your last chance to right a wrong. Offer genuine forgiveness to family members and friends who have wronged you, and seek humbly the forgiveness of others. This is a great warm-up for heaven. This is for the dads who yelled in the car on their way to Mass and the moms who ran out of patience an hour before the opening prayer. This is for the kids who talked back that morning and the friend who upset you greatly the night before. The

kiss of peace isn’t just a time to “get right” with one another but also to give others permission to hold you to a higher standard. It demonstrates your humility as well as God’s grace actively at work in you.

9. Relish the silence.

You know when those silent moments are coming. Relish them. Silence, properly understood, is not our gift to the Father but his gift to us. It’s in these intimate moments that we, like the beloved disciple at the Last Supper, draw near to our Lord and rest our heads upon his breast. The saints remind us that it is in these moments that we are closest to God within our day or week.

10. Go forth with purpose.

Do you leave Mass with a mission? There are people who desperately need what you have! Before you exit that pew, before your genuflection is complete, and before you deactivate the car alarm in the parish parking lot, have a goal, a purpose, and a plan. Who are you going to invite next week? Who are you going to reach out to at work or school? What do you need to work on personally, and how do you plan to unleash the powder keg of grace within your soul in the coming hours and days? The question is not whether you have been empowered at Mass but whether you comprehend the power that exists within you—and what you plan to do about it.

Excerpted from Behold the Mystery: A Deeper Understanding of the Catholic Mass by Mark Hart (The Word Among Us Press, 2014). Available at wau.org/books