

Fr. Curtis Miller July 4-5, 2020 Homily for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

As you probably saw on the news, the Diocese had to close three churches in Vermont this past week, in part because we don't have enough priests to cover all our churches. Looking at the latest Vermont Catholic Magazine, too, you might have read the article about the decline in the number of parishioners and priests, baptisms, marriages, and other sacraments over the past few decades. Only the number of funerals has remained high. It's depressing to think about, and sometimes it feels like we're passengers on a sinking ship. We ask, "What went wrong?" "What can we do to bring in more members to the Church and keep the ones we have?"

These are important questions, but at a challenging time like this, I think we need to get even more to the basics. Why do bother practicing our Faith? What is the Church anyway? If we can answer these questions ourselves, then we will be better able to invite people to join us in the Church. But if we don't know what we're inviting people to, then they probably won't want to join us, and we too are in danger of drifting away.

So why do we practice our Faith? Because God is real. He created us and loves us. He commands us to worship Him, not because He is selfish, but because He knows that it's good for us. When we take a break from our busy lives, whether to take a moment to pray, or to come here to Mass, God blesses us abundantly. He helps us with whatever we're struggling with. It takes effort to come here to Mass, but God gives us so much more in return. Jesus is truly the Son of God, Who became man, and Who comes to be with us at every Mass, especially in the Eucharist. He nourishes our souls with His very Body and Blood. This is the greatest gift we have from God, that He chooses to come be with us. Jesus, as our readings today remind us, is our king. On the Fourth of July, Independence Day, we celebrate when our country was formed by breaking away from a king, so why would we want to serve a king again? Because Jesus is a very different kind of king: He is a perfect, just, and humble king. Jesus humbles Himself so much that He sacrifices Himself for us. How could we not want to serve this king?

For some of us, coming to Mass might be more of a struggle though. Maybe you don't really feel like being here. Maybe you go to church because your parents force you to do, or they did when you were little. Maybe you are really busy at work and home, and you can't wait for Mass to be over so that you can finish all the things you need to do. Maybe you think it's boring. If any of these descriptions fit you, let me just say, "Thanks for making the sacrifice to come. I'm glad that you're here, and I hope that with time coming to Mass will become something you enjoy, that it will become more meaningful to you, and that it will be refreshing and renewing to you in the midst of life's struggles."

Not every Mass will be your favorite. There will be distractions, you won't get anything out of the homily, you'll see someone here who hurt you and that will make you

mad. Yes, those, and a hundred other things will bother you at some Masses, maybe many. But what's most important? What's at the heart of it all? By a miracle of God, Jesus comes to be present to us at every Mass, no matter if there are other elements that bother you or you don't like. That central truth will not change.

And if even that greatest of gifts doesn't give you peace and joy at a particular Mass, look around you. Maybe there's someone else who is struggling worse than you, with their life or their faith. Maybe there's someone who feels alone and isolated in life. When they see you sitting there, along with everyone else, you will give them comfort and encouragement, just by sitting there. By being here, you say, "I am here with you. I'm someone else who needs God's help. You are not alone." Something as simple as showing up could be one of your greatest acts of charity in a given week. Conversely, on a day when we say to ourselves, "I won't go to Mass this week, no one will notice anyway," you're wrong. We do feel your absence and miss you. (I know things are a little different right now with the pandemic, and some of us can't make it for health reasons, but we miss you—that's why we film these Masses for people who have to stay at home—and we look forward to having you back with us).

For many who drift away and stop coming to Mass, it's because they disagree with a teaching of the Church. If you are on the fence because of a struggle like that, let me know; I'm here to listen and to help you better understand why the Church teaches certain things. If not me, then please talk to another person of faith you trust, who might be able to help. Don't just walk away. Others leave because they have been hurt by a priest, a Church leader, or a fellow Christian. If that is something that has happened to you, again I say, please reach out to me or another person of faith. We want to be there to listen to you, to share your pain, and to help bring you justice and healing as best as we can. Don't just walk away.

In the "good old days," when we had full churches and many people receiving the sacraments, I think we took people for granted. We don't want to do that anymore. Each of you is precious to us. You are our treasure. Without you, we do not have a Church because you are the Church. And the Church exists to serve you and help you encounter the living God, and receive the graces and blessings that He pours out through the Church. If there is something we could do to help you better experience that, let me know. We'll do our best, but we'll need your help and participation, too. The Church is not a sinking ship, but it is one that needs us all on board and rowing, otherwise it will just drift aimlessly wherever the waves push us. But if we all pull together, then we will all be helping each other draw more closely to God Himself.