

**Mass Matters by Fr. Bausch**  
**Chapter 7 The Assembly of the Broken**

If by going to church we are making a statement, we should also be going as who we are, which is to say, beloved but broken. Both are essential attitudes to bring to church, but they seldom surface.

There are people who treat going to church like visiting a country club: a pleasant place with such nice people who dress nice, and who greet and smile at each other.

At the same time, we are also full of secret doubts, fears, yearnings, questions, pains, and sins of one sort or another. Soon after we get there, we do acknowledge our limitations and confess to one another our faults in a public setting. Although that startling thought, dulled by routine, never occurs to us especially if, after the celebrant invites us to confess our sins, in a millisecond he leads: "I confess to Almighty God, that I have greatly sinned in what I have done and failed to do...through my fault, through my most grievous fault.." So, with no time to pause for a quick examination of conscience, we tend to mumble through the confession mindlessly and move on. We stand. We sit. We smile and give the sign of peace. We're all "fine" when someone asks us, as we stand beneath a cross on which hangs a beaten, nearly naked man suffering publicly on our behalf.

#### The Downstairs Church

But something is missing, something in contrast to what occurs in many parish churches, not on Sundays but on weekday nights, and not in church but under it. It's usually in a church basement that the holiest hour of the week takes place because it's there where a mismatched group of CEOs, single moms, doctors, accountants, victims of clergy abuse, housewives, and homeless veterans share in the communion of strong coffee and dry pastries and engage in the sacred act of telling one another the truth.

They admit their powerlessness and dependency. They conduct inventories of themselves. They confess to God, to themselves, and to one another the exact nature of the wrongs. They ask for help. They summon up the courage to expose their darkness to light: "My name is Sheila and I'm an alcoholic." It's an AA meeting.

If we came to church with the AA mentality then Mass might be more meaningful, not just something to be endured. If we come with my favorite prayer on our lips - "O God of the Second Chance, here I am again!" - it would open us up to God's saving presence and the sense that here is where we should be. There are other attitudes to also embrace, such as we come to church not so much to seek answers as to find the strength to live the questions. We come not to seek certainties but trust. We seek not solutions but hope. We come to church not only looking for a cure but, more deeply, for healing. One refers to the body, the other to the soul. We come to find the strength to enter into the broken lives of others and hold them in love. We come to church because we can't be Christians on our own, and because salvation is communal. We come because these words, written by a young adult, also belong to us:

"Now, here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall never achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you read these words. My secret is that I need God, that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

This means that we come to church because we are expected to be there. We too often forget that Jesus associated with sinners and misfits, and so naturally he was expecting us. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17) Our attitude is that we're there not to be seen, not to fulfill an obligation, but because we have been called, because we have a shared sense of need. We're there because we know that things are not as they should be in our lives, but that God cares for us anyway as we are. We go to church to be reminded that whatever the ups and downs of life, we are held in the dependable relationship and unblinking gaze of One who holds us.

One mother sums it up: "I do not impress anyone at church...I am not special at church, and this is the point...we are all equally beloved children of God...I have come to sit next to people, well aware of all we don't have in common, and face together in the same direction...Church is a group of broken individuals united only by our brokenness travelling together to ask to be fixed... Church isn't an escape from the world. It's a continuation of it. My family and I do not go to church to deny the existence of darkness. We go to look so hard at the light that our eyes water."

We need to examine our motives and attitudes in coming to church. If we come to church with a deep consciousness of our shared brokenness; if we come to church because we believe Jesus took the power of sin and evil, pain and death and make them, no longer the last words but put them next to the last words which are forgiveness and everlasting love; if we come to church because of the bread blessed and shared; if we come to church to be a witnessing and supporting assembly, then coming to church would be easier to do. It would be treasured, not endured.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you realize that the parish church is really one of the truly democratic venues in the world? As minister Fred Craddock put it, "The most extraordinary piece of Christian furniture is the pew, which invites former strangers to sit together as family." Are we, at St. Francis of Assisi, open to sitting next to the visiting stranger, welcoming them as new family?

2. At the start of Mass the celebrant says, "Brothers and Sisters, let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries." The quotation that follows might give some content to this exercise.

"I'm tired of the lies. I hear them daily, read them nightly and watch them before I go to bed. They are so prevalent that I have a hard time knowing what is truth and what is fiction. Do cars really make you sexy? Are diamonds forever? Is a purchase the best way to show love? Is my worth tied to my waistline and my wallet? Am I worth loving based on my productivity or stature? I know that the answer to each of these is No. I know that these are lies, and yet I can't help but wonder. Somehow the father of lies is seeping into my subconscious and making itself at home."

Do you come to Mass ready to acknowledge the brokenness within yourself and to give yourself into God's healing presence?