

Mass Matters by Fr. Bausch
Chapter 6 Going to Church Disarmed

The stats: Today 98% of children from newborn to age eight access mobile devices at home compared with 52% in 2011. Ninety per cent of Americans own a cell phone and many are addicted to their mobile devices. You may be if you are among the 67% who check your phone or messages when your phone doesn't ring. One survey found that we check our phones 22 times a day - about every 4.3 minutes, and we use it 80 times a day. The average person spends 11 hours a day looking at a screen of some kind. Are you anxious when you don't have your cell or smart phone, uncomfortable when you accidentally leave it at home, restless till you get it, spend time on it when there might be better and more productive things to do? Do you feel the need to use it when there's really no reason to? Have you gotten what is called "text neck" pain from looking down at the phone or tablet too long?

Not only do the smart phones dumb down our reasoning but they also retard our social skills and relationships. Smart phones, with their endless connections and apps, their speed and portability, are "supernormal stimuli" that hijack and consume our attention, and because they are living encyclopedias, shut down our brains. Why do the work when we can look it up? The smart phone, so filled with instant information, lowers the need to think as the mind out sources more and more to the gadget.

The conclusion is obvious: Our love affair with, and our addiction to our gadgets, is a spiritual issue. I see people coming out of their cars and into the church vestibule fully engaged on their cell phones. Mass is barely over and their feet hardly out of the church proper when the cell phones are whipped out. Who knows, perhaps during those forty-five minutes the pope or the president called? What matters of worldwide import needs your attention?

I haven't even mentioned the hardcore group who text during Mass. The Pope said, "At some point, the priest during Mass says, 'Lift up your hearts.' He does not say 'Lift up your cell phones...'" But some still do anyway. The New York Times had an article about people at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan noting some worshipers accessing their smart phones. One woman even strode through the nave while Mass was going on wearing ear buds and chatting out loud all the while. So much for communal worship!

At the beginning of Mass, cantors around the land announce something like this: "In deference to the sacred liturgy, please turn off all cell phones." Still, despite any announcements, despite warnings, we are at the point when we feel emotionally naked without our phones. Even if we do turn them off, just having them with us is a built-in distraction especially if it vibrates during Mass. "Our bodies are in church, but our minds are inside our cell phones."

Why then, outside of being addicted, would you bring your cell phone to church at all? It's hard not to, but it clearly signals to God that you have a distracted heart. Wouldn't you prefer that the doctor who is operating on you, or the parent who is consoling a distraught child would have left his or her cell phone somewhere else? Conclusion: to come to church with a divided heart compromises the mandate to love God "with your whole heart, souls and mind."

Entering the sacred liturgy with a distracted mind and heart is not ideal, any more than entering the highway with a phone in your ear. Yes, come to Mass phoneless. Again, remember, even having them is a distraction. I know it is hard. It will take time.

Therefore, I propose a three-step plan. First, leave your gadgets in your car. Give them a rest. Give yourselves over to sacred space and sacred worship with receptive minds and heart. Better, as a parish, make it a crusade, a project, even a point of honor and ultimately, a parish point of identity: "We're a parish who does not bring cell phones to church"-right up there with "We're a parish who stays until Mass has ended."

Second, for those who want a step up: leave all cell phones and gadgets home. Don't even leave them in the car. This way, after Mass you and the kids won't be racing to the car to grab the phone like an addict needing a fix. It would make a statement to the kids that there are priorities in life.

Third, for the deeply serious, look forward to giving up the cell phone for Lent or, as a good practical compromise, do it gradually and give it up for the Fridays of Lent or another day of the week. It's a start, the beginning of regaining your soul. Best of all, make it a communal parish Lenten project, as earnest and difficult as giving up chocolate. If you want to be clever encouraging and find support, have a parish decal made for your car: "St. Francis of Assisi Parish: smoke free, gadget free."

Bottom line: Giving full praise for the gadgets that let workers gather knowledge, students conduct research, friends keep in touch, and grandparents rejoice in grandkids a continent away, let's also be mindful of the downsides and forge a new determination to make our gadgets servants instead of the masters. We can also let it be known far and wide that, when it comes to going to church, what Jesus said to Mary while Martha was on the cell phone—"She has chosen the better part"—is our motto.

Discussion Questions

1. Recalling the "religion is good for you" theme in Chapter 2, ponder the following. Human relationships are in deep decline since social media has dominated and family life has collapsed. Most children born to mothers under thirty are born outside marriage. Suicide rates are at a thirty-year high. Depression rates have upped tenfold since 1980. Loneliness is now almost an epidemic. In the 1980's, 20% of Americans said they were often lonely. Now 40% say so. In 2012, 5.9% of young people suffered from severe mental illness. By 2015, it was 8.2%. Teenagers spend more time alone with their digital screen; the greater the screen time, the greater the unhappiness. Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media are 27% more likely to be depressed. Heavy internet users are much less likely to have contact with their neighbors. Physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually going to church gadget free has benefits in the sense that taming the gadgets there may hopefully spill over to domestic and social life. Need we add that if we spend eleven hours a day looking at a screen, there is less time to spend in meditation and prayer?
2. Making Mass Matters should be a whole heart and mind project. How can you make it so?
3. Do we realize that turning off the gadgets or, better as we said, not bringing them at all makes a statement about priorities?
4. Would you be interested in starting a "no gadgets" in church campaign at St. Francis of Assisi?