

Mass Matters by Fr. Bausch Chapter 3 - Buying Into the Package

We are willing to go to enormous lengths planning for vacation: packing, traveling, traffic, inconveniences etc.. The same for trips to a ball game, exploring National Parks, standing in line for Black Friday sales. Annoyed or resigned, we buy into it because the ultimate goal is worth it. If only we could have the same philosophy when we go to church. Getting yourself or the family together, trying to be on time, minding traffic, finding a parking space, presuming a certain time frame, and slowly snaking out of the parking lot, are all part of the package of church-going and we should accept this as a fact of life and make the most of it— and, hopefully adopt an “it was worth it” attitude.

Mass a drag?

For some, going to church is a duty, something to get out of the way before the “real” day begins. Deliberately or subconsciously, they arrive late. They leave early by taking part in the time-honored Catholic Cakewalk of down the center aisle, up to communion, back up the side aisle to escape to the car before Mass is over... Do people really want to be so stingy and calculating with God? No, I suspect it’s just a habit, a frame of mind. We can hardly expect that people should feel the same way about a routine weekly event. Going to church is not like visiting the Grand Canyon. Still, in going to church we need a certain subconscious spiritual plan. How can we make going to church a “worth it” part of our lives?

Once we make up our minds that this time -the coming, the Mass, the going- belong to the communal worship of God and the strengthening of our community-then we accept the pluses and minuses of coming and going, give it all we have, and *give it the time it deserves*. Sometimes people do have to leave for a legitimate reason and we must respect that. Say a prayer for them and level no judgements. But if leaving early is a habit that’s not good enough. You wouldn’t want guests to leave before dinner was finished. Nor does the Lord want to see you bolt before the sacrificial meal is over. The final hymn is just that. Being stingy with God is not a good thing. We should not give the impression that going to church is something to get out of the way. The inconveniences we suffer waiting to exit the parking lot fall into perspective in the light of the time with God’s family.

Setting Priorities

This is God-community-worship-witness time. Relax and enjoy. No hedging where God is concerned, as Wilbur Rees reminds us:

I would like to buy three-dollars-worth of God, please.
I would like to buy just a little of the Lord.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
Not enough to take control of my life; I’ll keep
Just enough to equal a cup of warm milk,
Just enough to ease some of the pain from my guilt.

I would like to buy three-dollars-worth of God, please,
I would like to find a love that’s pocket-sized,
Not enough to make me love a black man.
Not enough to change my heart; I can only stand
Just enough to take to church when I have time,
Just enough to equal a snooze in the sunshine.
I want ecstasy, not transformation.
I want the warmth of the womb
But not a new birth.
I would like to purchase a pound of the eternal
In a paper sack guaranteed or money back.
You see, I would like to buy three-dollars -worth of God, please.

Discussion questions

1. What is your attitude on going to church? Anticipation? Duty? Dread?
2. Do you regularly come late or leave early? If regularly and not just now and then, what is this telling you?
3. How can you change the habit?
4. Could staying to the end start out as a Lenten project that you might continue?

5. Let's leave you with a smile:

A couple is walking out of church one Sunday. The wife asked her husband, "Did you see the strange hat Mrs. O'Brien was wearing?"

"No," said the husband.

"And did you notice those poorly-dressed children in the pew ahead of us?"

"No, I didn't," replied the husband.

"Bill Smith badly needs a haircut, doesn't he?" commented the wife.

"Sorry, but I didn't notice," was the husband's response.

"You know, John," said the wife impatiently, "sometimes I wonder if you get anything out of going to church."

Pastoral Suggestion

In the spirit of the last chapter's suggestion, let me offer "The Cracker Barrel." It's a kind of now-and-then town hall meeting with the pastor. Very informal. Open to all. Snacks and Drinks are in order. I sit on a raised platform and proclaim, "All right. What do you want to talk about? Here's your chance to ask questions you always wanted to ask but were afraid to." The questions often start off mildly, like "How come Frank Sinatra got Christian burial?" and then move to today's, "How come people can marry, divorce, remarry and still go to Communion?" These Cracker Barrel meetings are fun and satisfying. They give people a platform to express their questions about many churchy things. Highly recommended.