

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 7, 2016

Spiritual Ponderings

Ten Lessons the Mass Is Trying To Teach Us

I had a classmate in the seminary who in every class would ask the same question: "Is this going to be on the test?" Every time he would ask that question, I could not help but think that he was somehow missing the point of education that the seminary was trying to provide us. Anyone can pass a test but we were supposed to do something more with the knowledge that we were gaining. We came to learn in order to be changed as a person. If God was willing we would use the knowledge that our teachers were trying to impart on us to be God's instruments of healing and peace. As priests our greatest tests would never be reciting Church dogmas to the people we served but rather helping them understand how these dogmas applied to their lives. Some of the greatest lessons, I learned at the seminary, I was never tested on and I am not sure if the seminary could even develop a test that would show that I learned that material. My Spiritual Ponderings for this month is a reflection on the Mass and ten life changing lessons that I believe God is trying to teach us through our attendance at Mass.

1. The Mass teaches me that I am a part of something much bigger than myself.

The first thing I believe the Mass teaches me is that I am a part of something much bigger than myself. A good friend of mine works as a maintenance supervisor for a mine near St. Louis. Many of his fellow workers are active members of their Christian faith communities. My friend over the years has heard his fellow Christian co-workers talk down about the Catholic Church many times. Instead of just sitting back and taking it, he has invested a lot of time into learning what the Catholic Church teaches so he can defend his faith to his coworkers. He once told me of an incident at his work where one of his co-workers came in to work particularly upbeat. The coworker explained that his positive attitude came from the fact that his Christian community had a wonderful celebration over the weekend. At this celebration his minister conducted an altar call inviting people to come forward and claim Jesus Christ to be their personal Lord and Savior. His coworker went on to say that over a hundred people came forward that weekend and it was the largest altar call that his Christian community had ever had.

It was not long however, my friend explained that this coworker began to make fun of the Catholic Church and told him that the Catholic faith was not a true faith because we did not allow people the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

My friend said he paused for a moment and then told his coworker that he was wrong and that the Catholic Church holds an altar call every weekend and it called the Mass. My friend went on to explain to his coworker that every week the priest holds up the Eucharist and says "This is my body, this is my Blood," and all the people come forward to the altar and respond "Amen," which means I believe. The Mass teaches us that we are not individuals in search of God but rather we are companions on a journey toward the heavenly y Promise Land with God mysteriously in our midst. Our faith as Catholics is bigger than just "God and I" but stretches to include all who bear the name Christian.

Another way the Church teaches me that I am a part of something bigger is by the fact that the Church can trace its roots and the roots of the Mass all the way back to Jesus Christ and His apostles in the upper room on the night before He died. I believe that there are some prayers that we say at Mass that date back before the New Testament was even put together. The story of the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24) shows us how dear the Eucharist and thus the Mass was to the early Church. Luke in the Acts of the Apostle describes the best Christian community as being gathered around the apostles for the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42).

2. The Mass teaches me is that I am not in Charge.

The second lesson the Church teaches me through the Mass is that I am not the one in charge. God is. Even as a priest and as the main celebrant of the Mass, I am not the one in charge. I must bend my will to that of God and his Church. One way in which the Church teaches us that we are not in charge is that she is the one who laid out the ritual for us. We don't simply come together and do whatever we want as Catholics. We follow a detail ritual that is laid out for us by the Church. We do not randomly open the Bible to a page and begin reading but instead we follow a three year cycle of readings on Sunday and a two year cycle of readings for weekday Masses.

An additional way, we are shown that we are not in charge is through the human side of the liturgy. No matter how much we prepare for a Mass there will always be something out of our control that happens. It almost never fails that a child starts screaming at the beginning of my homily. A cell phone will start to ring during the petitions and sadly

it will belong to the poor old lady in the front pew who won't turn it off because she is too deaf to hear it or she does not know how to turn it off because she only has it because her children wanted her to have it for safety reasons. These little disasters are like larger natural disasters in the world as they remind us that no matter how advanced our science and technology maybe we still in reality have control over very little.

Finally entering into Mass, we learn that we are not in charge when we have to let go of our personal preferences. For example the choir directory chose music that Sunday that is more Protestant than Catholic in its theology or when a visitor sits down in the pew that I normally sat in forcing me to sit somewhere else. All of these things serve as little reminders that we are not in charge and that is fine because God is in charge.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 14, 2016

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Let us continue to look at some of the hidden ways God is shaping us through the Mass

3. God desires to be a part of my life.

A priest, who gave a parish mission that I attended, made a statement that really struck me. The priest said that when our parents found out that they were going to have a child, all they could do was wish for a boy or a girl. They had no power to make sure the child would be a boy or a girl and they definitely had no control over the personality that would come with this child. God when cooperating with our parents wished for you! Jeremiah so beautifully wrote: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." (Jeremiah 1:5).

There are many people in the world who think that we are just the product of chance. They surmise that there was some big explosion and millions of years later here we are. I compare this to a two-year old dumping a bucket of Lego on the ground hoping that they will magically form in the spaceship or house that is on the front of the box without his help. It just is not going to happen.

Jesus instructs us in the Gospels that His mission is to draw all things including you and I to Him and nowhere is this more evident than at the Mass. He calls us and beckons us toward the altar to receive His very Body and Blood, Souls and Divinity. The main lesson we should learn from all of this is that we are wanted and loved by God. Even though we are not worthy to receive our Lord under our roofs, He heals us and makes us worthy. He demonstrates to us in the Mass also that He is willing to die for us in order to spend eternity with us.

Our God could have created the world and set in motion and never have anything to do with it again. This is what philosophers and theologians call the deist idea of God. We know through the Scriptures though that our God has chosen not to let us go on without Him but rather He has chosen to be with us in time. This is why the creed includes the reference to Pontius Pilate. God saving us did not happen in some mythological time before the beginning of history but happen in actual time and He is still making his presence known in time through the Mass.

Another way of looking at all of this is that God could have chosen angels to be the ministers of his Sanctuary but instead He has chosen frail human beings.

4. God only invites

When two adults talk respectfully to each other we refer to this as assertive or healthy communication. If the relationship is unbalanced because one person fears the other person the one who feels inferior may do one of two things. The first is he or she may withdraw or secondly they may try to compensate by becoming more aggressive. When a person becomes more aggressive they also normally become louder and more willing to invade another's personal space. The very fact that they have to act this way shows that they are the one who has the issue and not the person they are conversing with.

God never becomes aggressive. He is always inviting both in the stories of Scripture like Gabriel asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the Mother of God instead of informing or demanding her to become. Isaiah has a beautiful vision of God in the heavens and God invites him to be his prophet. Peter upon recognizing Jesus as God asks Jesus to leave because He knows He is a sinful person but Jesus does not leave but rather invites Peter to be a co-worker (Luke 5). God does not force us to come to Mass. He invites and maybe He even prods us a little but He never forces. He

respects us by respecting our free will. He could if he wanted to send an army of angels to drag us to Church but He does not.

5 Being Open Up the Wider World

Carl Marx, the founder of socialist philosophy, referred to religion as “the opium of the Mass. What he meant was that he thought religion as something that de-motivated people and made them happy with the status quo. I don’t think he thought to hard when he said that because Catholic Relief Services is the world’s largest humanitarian aid organization in the world. The Catholic Church throughout the world is living out the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy every day of its existence. By coming to Mass we do not only pray for the rest of the world, we are inspired to help our brothers and sisters in need because we realize that we are one Body in Christ.

We also learn from each other. I know that my own vocation has been nurtured by different lay parishioners who were role models for me growing up as it was by the parish priest who invited me to think about the priest hood.

God challenges us to see beyond our selfishness to see the beauty of God’s creation.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 21, 2016

Spiritual Ponderings

Ten Lessons the Mass Is Trying To Teach Us

Let us continue our look at God’s ability to shape us through the liturgy.

6. Ministry of Presence

My first night as a priest in my first parish assignment my pastor handed me the keys and took off for a month’s vacation. I remember saying a little prayer that night asking God to allow me to get through the night without having the emergency line ring. The emergency line was a special extension that would ring the phone by my bed and wake me up. The line was reserved only for cases in which someone needed a priest because their love one was near death. About two in the morning I was awoken by the ringing coming from my bedroom phone. Knowing that this meant there was someone in the hospital that was near death and needed a priest, I prayed that this particular time the situation would not involve a child. God did not answer that prayer either. On the phone was the father of a one year old who was dying with cancer. He and his wife were hoping that a priest would come to the hospital and say some prayers with them.

I quickly got dress and drove to the hospital all the time wondering what I was going to say. Over the next hour or two I sat with the parents and said nothing (at least nothing of importance from my point of view) I just listened as the parents amazed me with stories of their faith and trust in God and their love for their baby girl. It was that night God taught me a very important lesson about presence.

We sometimes refer to the Eucharist as the Real Presence because we as Catholics believe that the bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus. In a mysterious way God becomes present to us in a way that respects our free will. As I spent that night remaining quiet and listening to the mother and father of the dying child, God makes Himself available to listen to us through the Eucharist. We always know where we can find God.

Some of you might say, can we simply pray to God in our room? The answer to that is “yes” but just as Christmas decorations help us get into the holiday spirit so surrounding ourselves with holy things can help me feel God’s presence all the more. I can look at a picture of my mom and be grateful for her or I can go and spend time with her and be grateful for her. In ways that go beyond my power to describe we come to know there is a difference.

When I first entered the seminary, I dreaded Holy Hours (An hour dedicated to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament). I could not figure how I was going to keep my attention on God for an entire hour. Then one day it dawned on me, that I did not have to do the same thing for the entire hour and so I spent some time journaling, some time praying the rosary, and I always tried to include a good chunk of silence so I could simply let God know that I was there for Him. All of these thoughts came to my mind a few weeks ago when I was called to the hospital because my dad had fallen out of bed at the nursing home. All I could do was sit there and read my books as they took him for x-rays and blood tests but I know it made him feel better knowing that I was close by. In a similar way I believe God appreciates our efforts to be close to Him.

7. Love Does Not Have to Be Big & The Best Way to Show Love is By Sacrificing for Others.

On Holy Thursday night the night that we celebrate the Last Supper, which was the first Mass, in which the Eucharist was instituted, we read from John's Gospel about Jesus washing the feet of His disciple. Jesus took on the role of the slave and the servant to show us in a living parable of sorts how much He loves each one of us. The Mass teaches me that through small ways I can love God and others. For example, I can love God simply by asking God to be a part of my life and this I do at the beginning of the Mass when I call upon his name and make the Sign of the Cross. I can improve my relationship with God and others by simply admitting that sometimes I make mistakes like I do when I participate in the Penitential Rite. I can grow closer to God by simply listening to His Word. My love for God grows as I hear all that He has done in order to rescue me from slavery of sin and death and this motivates me to want to help others in gratitude for all that God had done for me. One last example, I see God become more vulnerable than I can ever imagine as He entrusts himself in the Eucharist to our care.

Mother Teresa supposedly said "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." God who can do great things shows love to us many times in small things.

Saint John Paul II in his writings talks about love as wanting what is best for the other even if it requires a sacrifice on our part to bring that about. The opposite of love therefore is not hate but rather objectification. Objectification is being where we use another person as an object so that we can fulfill our selfish desire. At Mass we live out the ultimate act of love – Jesus' death on the cross. Repeat participation in this mystery if we allow it will change us to become more loving.

My brothers and sisters and I often joke about who is our mother's favorite. The joke is that they all think it is me because I am the oldest, most responsible, the priest, etc. I have come to believe that my mother loves us all equally but that I have the best relationship with her. God had gifted me with the insight very early on that one of the simplest ways that I could show my mother love was by taking sometime and talking to her each day. Every day, I talk to her for anywhere from five minutes to a half-hour. Most of these conversations take place over the phone but they do take place. Many of my brothers and sisters despite the fact they were living in my parent's house had periods of time where they did not talk to her because they were too busy and their relationship with our mother suffered.

Some of my brothers and sisters have caught on to this dynamic and I can see how their relationship with our mother has improved greatly because they are now taking time to talk to her each and every day. The Mass teaches me the key to good relationship is sacrifice.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 28, 2016

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Here are 3 more lessons God is teaching us.

8. God is faithful

I have never been a great athlete. I was always a little overweight and I suffered from a mild coordination problem. Sadly this made me very unpopular growing up and most of the time in elementary school and a good part of high school I was the social outcast. I remember one weekend though one of the boys in my class invited me over to his house to play. I was extremely excited and I enjoyed my time over at his house. Sadly on Monday morning I was devastated when I realize that nothing had changed, I was still a social outcast and he was still a part of the in-crowd. I could not figure out (and still today) how he could have acted like a friend one moment and go back to the old way of treating me the next.

Over the years, I have had other experiences that were similar to that childhood trauma. God though has always been there for me. God has never not shown up at Mass. I can always find God in the Blessed Sacrament and no matter how much I blamed Him for my problems, questioned Him about my situations, He was always there whispering His love into my heart. He always had time for me.

9. I am alright & God wants me to be the very best version of myself.

This leads me to the next lesson the Mass has taught me and that it is okay to be me. God loves me no matter what and He is always there helping me become better. This may be the hardest lesson for me to learn. So many times in life I have experienced rejection for not fitting a mold that others had designed that sometimes I attribute that same mentality to God. Jesus reminds us through the Scripture that God loves us all equally and unconditionally. He loved the tax collectors and prostitutes as much as he loved the chief priests and scribes. The sad part, the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, did not return that love because they thought they were better than Him. The others knowing they were not better were able to grow closer to him.

Jesus teaches us at the Mass that we are all equally loved by God. There is no bouncer at the entrance of the Church checking identification cards. There is no one telling us to enter through the servant's entrance or to sit in a certain section because we are not special enough to sit up front. God desires all of us to be gathered around His table. As I reflect upon all that God has given me and tries to teach me at Mass, I can come to only one conclusion and that is God wants me to be the best version of myself as possible. Following God's will does not enslave me but rather liberates me. Like a coach who inspires his players in practice through different drills to become better players, God inspires us through the different parts of the Mass to become better people. For example, basket ball players become better at rebounds by practicing it; Christians learn to become better at forgiving others by attending Mass. Throughout the Mass, I get to practice many different virtues, forgiveness, justice, etc. and thus I am learning how to be a better person through the Mass.

10. God's Ways are not our Ways

Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his writings suggests that each of us has three enemies that try to prevent us from doing God's will. The first enemy is our selves because of original sin; we do not always do the right thing or have the right priorities. Our second enemy is the world or culture around us. Our society for example tells us to use force others to do things so that we can get our way. Jesus on the other hand teaches us to turn the other cheek. Finally, we Catholics do believe that there is an evil spiritual creature named the devil who desires our misery because he knows our misery upsets God.

In the Gospel Jesus lays us out for a path to happiness that is contrary to the path that the world lays out for us. It is up to us to choose which path we will take. We see for example in the beatitudes (Mathew 5) that Jesus teaches us to be poor in spirit but the world tells us that we need to be focused on gathering wealth to be happy. The world tells us to hold grudges and seek revenge. Jesus teaches us to be merciful and turn the other cheek.

As Jesus teaches us through His preaching the correct way to heaven, God reinforces that teaching through the Mass. Left to my own devices, I would never admit that I have made mistakes but yet at the beginning of each Mass we have the penitential rite. If I was to do things my way, I would spend my time listing my accomplishments not listening to reading from Scriptures that challenge me to be a better person. St. Paul I think says it best in his letter to the Philippians: "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him (2:5-9)". God helps us to understand this great mystery better each and every time we attend Mass with an open heart.

