

Coming Home: What It Means to Gather

Remember the last time you traveled somewhere? Most likely, you were excited about the experiences you would share with fellow travelers and the places you would go. As the People of God, we too are on a journey—a spiritual journey to the Kingdom of God.

Did you ever look around at Sunday Mass to discover just who your traveling companions are? Walking into church, we are part of an activity that is in progress. We are in the process of gathering as a people.

Some people use the gathering time before Mass exclusively for quiet prayer, while others might use some of that time to socialize in the narthex with fellow parishioners. Many people both exchange greetings and pray prior to Mass. The way that the faithful gather does not matter as much as who comes to the gathering. The people gathered at prayer arrive with many experiences of joy, heartbreak, and challenge.

On a recent Sunday, I reflected on those who were gathered. There was Shirlie, awaiting test results and word of further treatment for cancer. Sofia was soon to be off to New York to audition for Julliard and other colleges, and Joe was trying to stay sober one more day. Tom was eagerly anticipating retirement, and Jane was facing yet another week of trying to make ends meet. Ben and Laura, young and in love, were in the midst of planning their wedding, and Katrina and Rajeev were elated that after nearly twenty years of waiting, they will soon have a grandchild. These stories put flesh on what it means to die and to rise again. They are stories of pain and loss and joy and thanksgiving and hoping against hope.

Our gathering expresses the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. His story of dying and rising is within each of us. Recognizing this, the liturgical documents emphasize the gathering of the assembly. The



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Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, a document of the Second Vatican Council, states that Christ is present “when the Church prays and sings” (7). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that Mass begins “when the people are gathered” (120). These statements show that the Church holds that the gathered community has significance.

Before the first note is played or the first prayer uttered during the liturgy, our gathering is a holy event. The very gathering of the faithful is a sign of God's presence in and solidarity with the world.