

# MASS MATTERS

REFLECTIONS OF A  
PARISH PRIEST

WILLIAM J. BAUSCH

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PUBLISHING



Published by Clear Faith Publishing, LLC  
100 Stevens Landing Dr., #206  
Marco Island, FL 34145  
[www.clearfaithpublishing.com](http://www.clearfaithpublishing.com)

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Cover and Interior Design by Doug Cordes

The interior is typeset in Blacker and Molde SemiCondensed

ISBN: 978-1-940414-26-3

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my nephew, John Anderson,  
who both in need and in deed,  
is always there.*

# CONTENTS

Introduction: About This Book vii

## Part I: Time and Place

- 1 The Mass Then and Now 3
- 2 The Importance and Impact of the Parish Church 11

## Part II: The Essentials

- 3 Buying into the Package 23
- 4 Making a Statement 29
- 5 A Vestibule Reflection 37
- 6 Going to Church Disarmed 41
- 7 The Assembly of the Broken 49
- 8 Less Than Great Expectations 53
- 9 Mass Etiquette 59
- 10 Heard Any Good Homilies Lately? 65
- 11 The Rainbow Church 73
- 12 Cantankerous Comments 81

## Part III: The Challenges

- 13 Empty Seminaries: What Happens When  
We Run Out of Priests? 95
- 14 Empty Pews: Where are all the Old People? 105
- 15 Empty Future: Where Are All the Young People? 111
- 16 A New Alliance 121
- An Afterword 127
- Footnotes and Credits 129

## **INTRODUCTION: ABOUT THIS BOOK**

The title *Mass Matters* is a play on words. The second word, in the upper case, is used as a verb and emphasizes that this ancient rite of Christian worship is central to our identity as Catholic Christians. However, when this word is in the lower case and used as a noun, it describes the parts that make up the Mass. This book is about both meanings. After examining a bit of the history of the Mass and the place of the parish church in our lives, I get into the inner furniture of the soul as it were, meaning the emotional attitudes we have in getting to church the public statement made by going to church, and, finally, the place of proper humility, silence, and reverence. After that, I take on cantankerously hypnotic smart phones, compulsive late-comers and those who leave-early, dysfunctional sound systems, weak lectors, grandstanding music ministers, over-pious celebrants, fussy deacons, misplaced church announcements, bad homilies, foreign priests, the new Hispanics, the overrated three-year lectionary cycle, the underrated parish bulletin, and widespread parish hopping. There are lot of good pastoral suggestions to remedy these defects and not a little crankiness to challenge your charity.

After exhausting these topics (and the reader) and liberally tossing around vital statistics, I invite the reader to probe deeper by

focusing on the current radical and challenging issues that militate against churchgoing: empty seminaries (we're running out of priests), empty pews (we're running out of churchgoers), and empty replacements (we're running out of young people). I end with a proposal of a new alliance.

So, in one way this is a book about the liturgy, but it will soon become apparent that its consistent subtext, its real and deeper pastoral intent, is to offer the remnant—the people who loyally stay—a challenge to double-check unmet hopes and the dullness of routine and to reset their churchgoing lives in terms of making a statement, no matter what the experience or how they feel. It's a book meant to invite such faithful people to become more intentional Catholics, thereby seeding the future.

After each chapter, there are discussion questions to consider, plus some random pastoral suggestions (taken from my book *The Total Parish Manual*) that do not necessarily relate to the chapter but are offered as something that promotes parish community.

Who is the intended audience of this book? The general answer is anyone who is curious and interested in remaining a Catholic or who wants a fresh look at what attending Mass should be, could be, like. The specific answer is activists and ministry people who, in cooperation with their pastors, want to make the parish better and more appealing in these days of declining numbers and the stained atmosphere of the clergy sex scandals. Ideally, a parish interested in refreshing and recalculating its appeal and effectiveness might run discussion groups using this book as a focal point and template for discussion.

I leave you with the words of a noted convert and churchgoer, Blessed Dorothy Day:

"The greatest challenge of the day is how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Jennifer Schlameuss-Perry, who cast an eye over the manuscript and aided me with compiling the websites and blogs, both foreign territories to me; to Deacon Vincent Rinaldi, Ray and Ellen Rugarber, Howie and Peg DePol, and Jack and Jane Davis for their encouragement and suggestions. I am particularly grateful to Lucille Castro, a long-time parishioner and friend, who gave so many hours trolling her considerable background to come up with persistently helpful corrections and wise suggestions. I am especially grateful to Christopher Bellito for his sharp editing, encouragement, and guidance.

## **PART I**

# **TIME AND PLACE**

*This part examines the way we worshipped in the past, the centrality of the parish, the parish as local church and the gifts of religion.*



# 1

## THE MASS THEN AND NOW

**THESE PAGES SET UP** the scene and provide a necessary overview of and context for what makes the Mass Matter. What we call so casually “going to church” or “going to Mass” is a long venerable practice. It’s an ancient thing we do. We can trace it to an upper room in Jerusalem about the year 33 of our era. We know the celebrant and the first congregation. We know its basic outlines, no matter how much it has been modified over the centuries: gathering, song, blessing, praise of Yahweh, bread broken, wine passed, and the words, “take and eat and drink” in remembrance; that is, break your life and pour out your deeds as I have done, and “I am with you all days.”

This scripture-blessing-taking and breaking and Holy Presence have been and still are celebrated in hidden places, private homes, dark prisons, underground, and in grand cathedrals. Yes, the Mass is very old and, yes, it is being celebrated openly or clandestinely somewhere around the globe as you read this. It is helpful every once in a while to realize that we belong to a vast community of saints—or as St. Paul uses the term, past, present, and yet to come. What we take so casually has been and still is celebrated with joyous fear and fearful joy.

But, to our point, the Mass has changed and the next time you go to church you are going to celebrate the latest version of it. And I don't mean just the relatively recent changes you are aware of, like the new translation of the Mass prayers, but those over the long haul from way back to its beginnings. Obviously, even in our own lifetimes, Mass wasn't always the way we know it. Some of you may recall the Latin Mass.

So, let's take a moment to hop, skip, and jump over the centuries.

The scene is a Passover-like devotional meal (although John will make it the actual Passover meal). Matthew 26:28 describes what happened. "While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to his disciples and said to them, 'This is my body'. Then he took a cup and, giving thanks, he gave it to his disciples saying, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured for many for the forgiveness of sin.'"

Luke (22:20) gives a slightly different version: "Then Jesus took a loaf of bread and, when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Later he did the same thing with the cup after supper saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant of my blood.'"

Luke's "Do this in remembrance of me" started the whole thing off. And it continued as Jesus's disciples and first followers after his death took him literally. Right away after those Last Supper days, the first Jesus-followers ate together- whether in the humble hovels of the poor or, more often, the better homes of the more affluent who had more space. They remembered Jesus with bread, wine, hymns, and stories. In doing so, they experienced his presence, his friendship, and were reminded over and over again to "do this in his memory." Not to *believe* this but to *do* this; that is, do what we would come to call the spiritual and corporal works of mercy—bless, break, and share. Luke's Acts of the Apostles (2:46) records, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of the bread together...all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all... day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home...."

Of course, being human like us, they had their dissonant moments. St. Paul, writing in around the mid 50's, just some twenty years after Jesus' death, had to remind the people of Corinth to forget divisions—for example, who was high- or low-born and who were the Jews and who were the late-comer gentiles, or who was eating separately when they came to the Lord's Supper. Rather, "when you gather to eat, you should all eat together" (1 Cor. 11:33). Gradually at these supper meetings, hymns were sung, scripture were read, and instructions given. In short, we have the first Masses spoken in the vernacular of common Greek and celebrated in homes since early Christianity was illegal. The gathering was probably led by the home's host. We're not sure if the host was male or female. The prayers centered on thanksgiving (Eucharist) and were extemporaneous, although early on some became fixed into what we would later call the canons of the Mass. Communion was under both species. But, all the while, the "bread broken" kept its emphasis: just as Jesus broke himself for us, so must we do likewise for others. This, for the first 300 years of persecution, was what we might call the era of the Simple and Flexible Mass.

### Things Get More Elaborate

Then around the 5th and 6th centuries we get the Long and Complicated Mass. What had happened, of course, was that the emperors Constantine and later Theodosius made Christianity the religion of the state. The upside to this liberation was felt by all those bishops and ordinary Christians who, finally free of persecution, could now worship openly as they pleased. The downside was that the Church, given official status by the Roman Empire, took on its structures, and soon imperial pomp soon invaded the sanctuary. Prayers grew more stylized and fixed. Solemn chants replaced familiar hymns and vested clergy led the worship. No longer were the people around the table. They were relegated to standing in the gathering space while only the clergy could preside at the altar. By this time, Christians were in cathedrals. By the Middle Ages, many laypeople received the "take and eat" Communion only once a year, and later not at all, so that the Church had to mandate that they receive at least once a year—the old "Easter Duty."

In short, everything is longer, grander, and more solemn. There are added prayers for the living and the dead, ceremonies borrowed outright from the Byzantine court ceremonials, including what early Christianity rejected as heathen practices such as genuflections, bowing, kissing, incense, and candles. The cults of the saints and martyrs flourished. It's a clergy-dominated, complex, and stratified worship.

The result was that, by the time of the 9th and 10th centuries, we get the Far Away and Silent Mass. For the first time in about a thousand years, there is silence. The reason that no one is talking or singing in church is because no one really understands Latin anymore. The choir has taken over all the singing parts and is now separated from the sanctuary and stuck over the entrance of the church. The sanctuary of the church has been decorated with a backdrop wall of sacred art and statues directly behind the altar that has been moved against it, thus forcing the priest to stand with his back to the people. The people's speaking parts have been taken over by altar boys. The people standing from midway to the back of the church could not see or hear. They at least wanted to see the Host and Chalice when they were consecrated so the Church had to introduce the elevation of the Sacred Species. Remember, the cathedrals were vast, and there were no electric lights or public-address system. We can appreciate the physical and emotional distance between the people and their Mass.

The fourth and final category, which persisted until Vatican II's revisions, was the Mass of the Rubrics. The 16th century Council of Trent, in a praiseworthy attempt to regulate the many abuses that had grown up around the Mass, put out strict rules and very minute directions or rubrics concerning everything from the way the priest wore the maniple (anyone know what that is?) to what to do if he dropped the Host. Trent inadvertently froze the Mass into a precise ritual passively watched by the people who said their private devotions in the pews. The public Mass of the clergy became a backdrop for the private piety of the laity.

The old Church had its faults and seeds of decline, of course. It could become insular and proud. Laws could be onerous. Clericalism was entrenched. Religious and ethnic prejudices sometimes

showed their ugly sides. Sometimes the church appointments and decorations were over the top. At times they could be inappropriate and distracting from the primacy of the altar. Private devotions and rosary-saying during Mass were common enough. Lighting candles was more important than Communion while the people, passive and silent, attended “Father’s Mass.”

## Vatican II Reforms: Pros and Cons

In the mid-sixties, the reforms of Vatican II were meant to correct this unbalance. As far as the liturgy goes, these reforms gave us the gifts of the vernacular, some marvelous hymns (after a slow start), participation by lay ministers and the congregation, and offered a more open church. Unfortunately, there was a downside. The liturgy reformers were limited to the university intellectuals who believed that, once the liturgy was understood and the people engaged in “active participation,” they would no longer need the embarrassing distractions of baroque devotions. They were surely right up to a point. Again, some of those “non-liturgical” devotions were only tenuously tied to biblical realities; others were lurid, and some came close to outright magic. There certainly was need for reform and we’re grateful for it, but, in some cases, it went too far.

We built churches that were functional, some were even close to being computer-like buildings, but we lost the sense of the beautiful—a rich source of awe and intimations of God’s closeness. The focus was unerringly on the altar, and so any “clutter” had to be removed. The angels and saints disappeared. Clear widows replaced stained glass. Banners and representational art appeared. Gregorian chant was out. Novenas and parish missions were no longer around. Processions dried up. In a word, popular devotions, intractably connected to ethnic groups, went into a decline. This was so much so that nearly forty years after Vatican II the alarmed United States Conference of Bishops felt compelled to issue a strong statement defending popular devotional practices. The American bishops, as well as Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, encouraged the return of popular devotions. I might add this was just in time because, as we shall see, with the Pentecostal-leaning Latinos dominating the

American church now and in the future, there is a need to restore sensible devotions into the way we worship.

### **The New Translation**

One priority of liturgical renewal was the translation of the Mass into the vernacular. The architects of the new Mass translation of 1998 left us a fairly reasonable and engaging product. However, the bishops decided to review the renewal and in 2011 they revised the Mass' translation. It has been a failure because they essentially bequeathed us a decidedly disenchanted and uninspired translation. The consensus is that it is, in the words of the highly regarded scholar Eamon Duffy, "a disastrously misconceived project." He continues, It is "archaic, verbose, and, in places, frankly unintelligible...larded with Latinate technical terms...The result is protracted sentences with multiple subordinate clauses, hard for priests to proclaim (Amen to that!) and for congregations to follow." Sometimes the priest and people shake their heads and ask, "What did I just pray?"<sup>1</sup>

It didn't have to be this way. We had a much better translation in the 1998 version, but the bishops were bulldozed into submission to accept the new version. The result is that today there is a real divide between those American Catholics who prefer the new vernacular liturgy of the Mass and the proponents of the pre-Vatican II Latin liturgy, a divide much wider and acrimonious in the United States than in other countries (some of them outright rejected the new translation). It's safe to say, I think, that the breach between conservative and liberal Catholics on other matters won't be solved until there's some kind of liturgical reconciliation.

All this history is not to say that, along the way and despite serious limitations, many beautiful additions have not enhanced the Mass. There were glorious oratorios, reflective Gregorian chants, magnificent Holy Week liturgies, and a deep sense of mystery which even the most dedicated champions of the modern revised vernacular Mass admit has been lost. I've always maintained this was because the officials in charge left the revisions solely in the hands of the heady professionals and failed to include the three essential P's—the pastors, the poets, and the people—in their search for a more relevant liturgy.

I suspect there are more changes to come, but still there remains

that basic action of bread broken and shared—by Jesus, by us. There are the scriptures, the altar table, the hymns, and the people. They go way back. As a writer in *The New Yorker* magazine wrote, he was haunted by the thought of “the ancientness of the Mass—that it and its antecedents very likely go further back into the human past than any other existing ceremony... I began to feel that the Mass gave me a living connection with my ancestors...” We should try to get those feelings, not only of connection to the past but also of connection with the present, especially with our persecuted brethren who, as you read this, are breaking bread at their peril.

Yes, through all the changes over the centuries, these unchanging realities bring to memory the assurance that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”—especially in the Eucharist.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the revised Mass?
2. How would you rate the liturgy in your parish?
3. Do you get anything out of attending Mass? If not, why not?

## Pastoral Suggestion

For most parishes, people who want to join (and get their kids into CCD) simply drop into the parish office, sign up and, like the Lone Ranger, depart. We came at it differently. People picked up a form telling them they would be contacted. When we had enough people, we then invited them to an orientation ceremony to explain the purpose of the parish and arranged for various people to speak about our ministries. Then we gave them (1) a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, which at the end they all contributed to the overall photograph of the parish church. They also received (2) a plant to remind them that we will grow together, and we (3) asked them to bring a photo of themselves and their family (we took the photos if they didn't have any). The photos went into our parish files so we could identify them. They also appeared in the parish bulletin and on the church bulletin board so that others could welcome them. Then, of course, there were refreshments. By and large, the people were pleased. It gave a human face to the parish welcome.

# 2

## THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF THE PARISH CHURCH

**AN OBVIOUS TRUTH:** FOR most people, Mass is celebrated in the communal space we call the parish church. We need to reexamine this basic unit of the Church that we take for granted. A gospel scene will set the stage.

Two disciples were staring at Jesus as he walked by. Jesus saw them out of the corner of his eye, turned and then said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said, “Teacher, where are you staying?” He replied, “Come and see.” The two disciples went, and they saw. They saw Jesus seeking out the company of the excluded, the wretched, the sick, and the poor. They saw mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and new life. And, so, they came to believe. (John 1: 36-39).

Ponder slowly the truths this episode reveals. The underlying attraction of a parish is that people are looking for roots long before they are looking for beliefs. People are seeking the lived story long before its official formulations. People are forming relationships long before they embrace religion. In short, community comes before religion, belonging comes before believing, story comes before liturgy, and action comes before assent. The proper tactic of reli-



gion, therefore, is not to push dogma but to offer shared experiences. No one can be argued into faith. To fool people into thinking that they cannot enter a faith unless they first wholeheartedly believe is getting things backwards. In all the great religious traditions the prophets and mystics spent little time telling people what to believe. Rather, people were first invited to trust that, despite all the tragic things to the contrary, our lives do have some ultimate meaning and value. Faith, therefore, is the fruit of discovery, not something you must have at the beginning of the quest. Yes, community first and belief second must be the parish's strategy. "Come and see."

### **The Centrality of the Parish**

For a long time, the parish Church in America had always been one of "come-and-see" attraction. It was one of the bedrocks of the faith and our link to the larger Church. It is the place where people, summoned out of their individualism to communal worship, most visibly become the Church. Parishes, like our schools, were built with great sacrifice and pride. When there used to be neighborhoods in America, the parish church was usually the "anchor store." It dominated the spiritual and social landscape. It supported and gave identity to the immigrants and, through its sacramental system, comforted people at every stage of life. In many places, like Philadelphia and Brooklyn, neighborhoods were often identified by the name of the parish church.

The parish *was* important. As I once wrote, "...the average Catholic (including future bishops) gets his or her first and lasting impression of 'the Church' from the parish; it is there that the first incorporation into the Body of Christ takes place; it is there that the daily dramas of life, union, death, and resurrection are celebrated; and it is there that struggles, failures, and reconciliations occur. In short, the parish is the vital and critical hand that first rocks the ecclesiastical cradle, and so its importance can hardly be overestimated. For Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the parish forms a lasting impression of what the 'the Church' is all about."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the old neighborhood parish, however insular at times, did provide the stories and symbols, sights and sounds of a religion that invited. Savor the following:

"The Catholic Church of yesterday had a texture to it, a feel: the smudge of ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, the cool candle against your throat on St. Blaise's day, the wafer-like sensation on your tongue at Communion. It had a look: the oddly elegant sight of the silky vestments on the back of the priest as he went about his mysterious rites facing the sanctuary wall in the parish church; the monstrance with its solar radial brilliance surrounding the stark white host of the tabernacle; the indelible impression of the blue-and-white Virgin and the shocking red image of the Sacred Heart. It even had a smell, an odor: the pungent incense, the extinguished candles with their beeswax aroma floating ceilingward and filling your nostrils, and the smell of olive oil and sacramental balm. It had the taste of fish on Fridays and unleavened bread and hot cross buns. It had the sound of unearthly Gregorian chant and the mournful song, *Dies Irae*. The church had a way of capturing all your senses, keeping your senses enthralled."<sup>3</sup>

These powerful symbols, the iconography, the statues of the saints, the Latin, the stained glass windows, the Ember days, the Lenten fasts, the novenas, parish missions, and monthly confessions gave many a sense of *feeling* Catholic—especially if you lived in a kind of Catholic ghetto, and especially if the neighborhood in many subtle ways reinforced your Catholicism. There was a perceptible whiff of enchantment. The effect was the comfort of knowing who you were, of knowing that, with all those angels and saints, you were never alone.

No more. Like others, Catholics in the United States after World War II moved out of the safe ethnic monolithic neighborhoods of their immigrant forbearers to the suburbs. That transition encouraged an increasingly pluralistic and secular society where the private car and the cornucopian mall ruled. Suburban identities faded into the general mix. Anonymous big city living was not friendly to a communal religion like Catholicism. The bonds of the sustaining and reinforcing structures of family, neighborhood, and ethnic identity slowly became undone. They were undermined by private consumerism and a pervasive secularism. Individualism replaced

community. The media replaced art. Celebrities replaced saints. “Rational” science replaced “irrational” belief. Wired, digital symbols replaced the vocabulary of the transcendent. There were benefits and there were losses in all this upheaval. The challenge to the modern parish, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, is to focus on a sense of community, to offer a “come and see” other way of life.

## Two Truths to Ponder

Meanwhile, when we do go to Mass, it is helpful to carry two truths with us.

The first is this: early on in Christianity, St. Paul began writing to some small, newly formed Christian communities scattered around the Mediterranean. His introductions grab us: “Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians,” or “to the church of God which is in Corinth.” Notice Paul said “to the church.” Yes, the full Church of Jesus was in Thessalonica and Corinth. These churches were in no way subdivisions of the Church in Jerusalem. They were full independent churches united with the others by a common faith, baptism, Eucharist, and apostolic preaching. They were not subsidiary branches of the mother Church in Jerusalem. They were fully Church in themselves.

I point this out because, I suspect, our mental image of the Church is that of an industrial complex model with its clones all over the world. That is to say, the average Catholic, both clerical and lay, thinks of his or her parish as a subsidiary of the Vatican. The local parish is looked upon in relationship to the Vatican corporate headquarters in Rome as the local Chevrolet dealer is in relationship to General Motors at its the corporate headquarters in Michigan.

In fact, the only reason we have parishes, we think, is that the pope, who is the pastor of the universal Church, obviously can’t handle the whole world, so he has CEO’s called bishops who oversee the carved up smaller units called dioceses. But the bishop can’t handle all his territory either, so he in turn subdivides it into parishes. The parish is the last subdivision, with the implication the parish exists only at the behest of the next higher level. It has no innate justification. It is but a branch office with all its standard

“products” bought from the parent company. Most people subconsciously understand the local parish this way. It’s what we call a vertical ecclesiology or vertical Church structure. The parish is a franchise under the brand name of Roman Catholic.

But this is clearly not so. You heard St. Paul. The local church exists in its own right and not just as an organizational, administrative sub-unit of the Church universal though connected to it. Vatican II’s doctrine of collegiality was very clear about this. The bishops in their “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (26) remind us: “This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.” Let me repeat this teaching: “This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.” Let’s continue:

“For in their own locality these are the new people called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness. In them the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of the gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated...In these communities...Christ is present. By virtue of him, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church gathers together, for the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ....”

## Ramifications

I know this sounds somewhat esoteric, but it has ramifications. Think again: the full Church of Jesus is present in your local parish. The parish with its pastor, the bishop’s representative, is not a mere subdivision of Rome or the diocese. It has its own integrity, shares a common mission, and is the full Church of Jesus Christ in union with others and the bishop of Rome (the pope) as symbol and capstone of that unity. Moreover, that Church—this church—is the People of God, to use the phrase of Vatican II, a people who have been called and commissioned by their baptism to be full, adult members presided over by a pastor who has been given Holy Orders; that is, his task is to bring a holy order to the gifts of the

people which they possess, not by delegation, but by their own right as baptized members.

In other words, the pastor's task is not to share his or the bishop's power with the laity but rather to call forth and remind them of the power they already have in virtue of their baptism. The laity, in short, are collaborators—equal co-laborers—in the common task of the Church. Indeed, when you come right down to it, being 96% of the Church, the laity is its most public element.

Listen to the United States' Bishops: "One of the characteristics of lay men and women today is their growing sense of being adult members of the Church. Adulthood implies knowledge, experience and awareness, freedom and responsibility, and mutuality in relationships... thanks to the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, lay women and men feel themselves called to exercise the same mature interdependences and practical self-direction which characterizes them in other areas of life."

### Pyramid to Circle

Those raised on the old paradigm of the Church may find all this challenging. They remember the pyramid church: there is the apex at which stands the pope, the "Vicar of Christ." At one more humble point in history, all he would dare claim was "Vicar of St. Peter." From there everything moves in a downward spiral to the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monsignors, most reverend, very reverend, unbelievably reverend priests, deacons, religious, lay ecclesial ministers and, on the bottom, women. These clerical favored ones—remember, *they* had a vocation and were clearly marked as destined for heaven—have been called to the more perfect life (especially the celibate ones) and holiness trickled down from them. Notice, for example, that in the old calendar of the saints, eighty percent of them were clergy or religious. Burdened with worldly marriage, children, and a job, the remaining laity's humble hope was that at best they would slip into purgatory with a scorched rump.

This old pyramid is slowly moving to the circle as today the emphasis is not on the holy orders of the few but on the baptism of the many. Vatican II earnestly issued a *universal* call to holiness

and reminded the laity of its witness to the world and to the Church itself. Take these sensibilities to church with you.

## The Second Truth

Our second truth is a very modern concern: Going to Mass is actually good for you and you should know why. I bring the subject up because the secular culture, following Sigmund Freud, tends to treat anything religious as a neurosis requiring therapy. In fact, our secular society demands that religion should be banned altogether or at least excluded from the public square. In this it has been successful because religion, it maintains, is harmful to human potential. However, the truth is quite the contrary. A well-respected author, Gregg Easterbrook, writing in the *New Republic*, makes the case: “Recent studies indicate that men and women who practice in any of the mainstream faiths have above-average longevity, better immune system function, lower blood pressure, and fewer anxiety attacks, and they are far less likely to commit suicide than the population at large.”<sup>4</sup>

The mention of suicide raises alarm bells. Very recent studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have reported that sadness and depression have increased from twenty to forty percent among adolescents, particularly teenage girls within the last twenty years. More ominously, it also reported in 2018 a twenty-five percent national increase in suicides. In 2016, for example, there were twice as many suicides as homicides. These studies have found that nearly 45,000 Americans aged ten or older had died by their own hand in 2016. All this is despite increased prevention efforts.

Social scientists are puzzled. They speculate about the usual causes: social isolation, lack of mental health treatment, drug and alcohol abuse, gun ownership, and so on. These reasons may be true, and we bless the people who press for reform. Still, constrained by official bias, the experts cannot bring themselves to make reference to the positive benefits of religion, certainly not as the whole answer, although a significant one.

The fact is that recent scientific research does emphasize that going to church weekly is good for you, and that regular religious attendance may add as much as two to three years to one’s life. In 2014 a review of research into spirituality and mental health

concluded, "Religion and spirituality have the ability to promote or damage mental health. This potential demands an increased awareness of religious matters by practitioners in the mental health field as well as ongoing attention in psychiatric research."

For us on the scene, there is no doubt that the support of regular worship at the parish- where people really look out for each other- helps tremendously to overcome social isolation. Church people do show up with dinner when friends are sick, visit them when they're down, and raise money for their operations. Probably a third of church members belong to some kind of small group, like Bible studies. Surveys do show that churchgoers have more contacts and social support than their un-churched counterparts. In short, there's a lot of one-on-one interaction, an awareness of what's going on, and we all know that social support is directly tied to better health.

Let's go back to Easterbrook, who goes on to cite the findings of a Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University Medical Center who has calculated that, with regards to any mainstream faith, the association between religious participation and good health holds for almost all of Christianity and Judaism, and presumably for Islam, as well. "The main distinction," he says, "seems to be whether you are a regular practitioner." Also, on average, regular churchgoers drink less, smoke less, use fewer recreational drugs, and are less sexually promiscuous than others. In 2014 a review of research into spirituality and mental health concluded, "Religion and spirituality have the ability to promote or damage mental health. This potential demands an increased awareness of religious matters by practitioners in the mental health field as well as ongoing attention in psychiatric research." Another researcher observes, "I think there may be another factor. Any faith demands that you experience the world as more than just what is material and observable. They sense God behind so-called reality. They can experience a loving God in the ordinary and that is a mainstay of support."

We church-goers don't want to go around like some TV hucksters saying, "Come to church and live longer!" like we're selling a face cream that erases wrinkles. We just want to appreciate that, as naturally religious people, going to church supports better living.

We just want to appreciate the fact that going to church makes for physical, mental, and spiritual health.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The parish may still be the best venue for renewal. Agree or disagree?
2. What's your assessment of your parish?
3. Are you active in the parish? Why or why not?
4. Meditate on Pope Benedict XVI's words: "The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced, and the art which has grown in her womb."

## Pastoral suggestion

Parish hospitality is an elusive quality, but we know it when we see it. One can immediately sense its presence—or absence—as one enters church: the attractiveness of the building, the warmth of the people, the friendliness of the ushers, and the sense of camaraderie among the people. There are some things that help promote it. One is having greeters in the vestibule holding doors open or handing out the bulletins (if you do that sort of thing). A friendly pastor in evidence helps. So do things like good music, a parish bulletin board with photos of new members or a photo of the recently deceased. Perhaps a sign-in book for visitors (those who give a readable address will eventually receive an acknowledgment card via the ministry of our shut-ins). Parishioners are primed to approach and greet anyone seemingly new. A small booklet on the history of the parish in the vestibule adds to interest and welcome.

Then, to prime the pump for involvement, there's the "one-shot-piggy-back" personal letter from the pastor asking people who would not otherwise be involved to volunteer for one simple short-lived activity. The people need to know they're not being conscripted for a long haul sentence. The idea is that, experiencing this freedom, they might be open to more in depth commitments later on. Examples would be helping serving coffee and donuts on one Sunday, having different neighborhoods in the parish decorate the church for Christmas, or inviting twelve non-active people- six males and six females from ages from eight to eighty- to have their feet washed on Holy Thursday. It's the cumulative things that add up. It's the sense of ownership that promotes hospitality.

Finally, transparency and communication are vital to maintain hospitality and good



will. In Surveys, people give high marks to their parishes for keeping them informed: the parish bulletin, websites, mail, and so on. Having a platform for dialogue, however, is another matter. It seems feasible, therefore, every once in a while, for parishes to send out surveys regarding the parish, the liturgy, Mass schedules, the leadership, and issues that may bother them.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William J. Bausch, a retired priest of the diocese of Trenton, is still active in parish ministry. He is the award-winning author of numerous books on parish ministry, the sacraments, Church history, storytelling, and homiletics. He has lectured and given workshops at such colleges and universities as Notre Dame; Sacred Heart in Fairfield, Connecticut; Boston College; Charles Carroll in Cleveland; and in most U.S. dioceses as well as abroad. His most recent book, *From No to Yes*, is a collection of 72 never-before-published homilies covering the liturgical cycles with an eye to contemporary issues. With his signature use of stories, Father Bausch engages us to enter into the ever ancient, ever new gospel of Jesus.