

Advent 3.07

1. A couple of weeks ago the diocese offered a talk given by a sociologist from Australia on the reasons why Catholics who have gone to Mass most of their lives have now ceased to attend. I cannot give you all the particulars of his investigation, but there is one point he made which made an impression on many of us. In the past we usually divided Catholics into two major groups, those who practice their faith, and by that we meant many things but the bottom line was going to Mass on Sundays, and those who do not practice their faith, and by that we meant many things, but again the bottom line was not going to Mass on Sundays. Now, he told us, there is a third group made up of people who insist that they are committed Catholics but do not attend Mass on Sundays. They do not see attending Sunday Mass as a necessary part of being a committed Catholic. I think they are wrong. Attendance at Mass on Sunday is essential for those who wish to define themselves as practicing or committed Catholics.

2. But what reasons could we offer such people to persuade them of the falsity of their position? Last week we spoke about people who define themselves as spiritual but not as religious because they do not wish to be part of organized religion. We said they

represent the individualism of contemporary Western society. We also gave two reasons we could offer them for coming back to church, one based on human nature, the other on the nature of God as God has revealed himself in Judaism and Christianity. First, human beings are by nature social. We need community in every aspect of our lives, and religion is no exception. Second, the God of Israel revealed himself as concerned with creating a people, and our Lord Jesus, a Jew, did the same. He created a community. We call it the church. Therefore, to be an individualist in religious matters is a misinterpretation of one's human life and of Jewish and Christian faith. Both Judaism and Christianity have stressed their communal nature by marking out one day of the week as the community's day to worship God: the Sabbath for Jews and Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, for Christians. Judaism has its third commandment: keep holy the Sabbath. Catholicism follows it by making Sunday its Sabbath and by imposing on its members the obligation to celebrate the Eucharist on that day.

But why have people who have gone to church for most of their lives now ceased to do so? They would probably accept the reasons we just gave for going to church, that it is a commandment of the church, that Jesus founded a community, and that as people we need each other. And yet they have ceased to go to Sunday

Mass. Why? Is it bad preaching or bad music? Is it immoral priests? Is it the church's positions on abortion or gay marriage? Or is it simply boredom? Doing the same thing again and again every Sunday can become boredom. Or could it be that we Catholics have not yet learned to pray well as a community? Maybe these people don't feel a sense of community when they come to church. They don't know the people sitting next to them and therefore feel alone at Mass. They don't hear others praying and singing. They don't experience the Mass as a community act: a play, a drama in which we all have our parts to play. Maybe that is one more reason why they have ceased to come.

What do you think? Do you think that our awareness of the communal nature of the Mass is very strong? There may be signs which reveal that it is not strong among us. For example, if we thought of ourselves as taking part in a communal action, would we not express that by sitting closer together? Not on top of each other, of course. But what are we saying to ourselves and to others when we sit as far away from each other as we possibly can? We here at St. Charles have a problem in this matter because we have a church which is too large for us. I think we need to huddle together a little more closely if we are going to have a sense of community in this huge church when we are only forty, sixty or 100 people. I

remember the first conference for priests of the diocese I attended two years ago. The guest speaker, Archbishop Pilarczyk, was the speaker and told us that we should not celebrate Mass for a half-empty church. I had to tell him that I do that every weekend. I believe his answer was that either Masses should be combined or the parish should be closed or merged.

Bismarck, the famous chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890 who fought the Catholic Church because it was tied to Rome and therefore not under his control, once said that the Catholic Church could function very well without lay people. All it needed was its hierarchy because the hierarchy made all the decisions. Indeed the Mass itself could be celebrated by the priest alone. He was right. There was supposed to be an altar boy present, something which testified to an almost forgotten awareness of its communal nature, but that was all. Vatican II changed that. It rediscovered the fact that the Mass is the action of the community. But some of us still have one foot in the pre-Vatican II understanding of the Mass. For example, if you come in late to Mass, should you kneel down and say your own prayers even though the scriptures are being read? I don't think so. I think you should sit down and listen to the Scriptures, because that is what we, the community, are now doing. And should we prance into Mass if the Scriptures are being read?

No, we should wait until there is a break in the action. People are not allowed to interrupt a play or concert. They have to wait until the end of the act or the movement. We should wait until the reading is finished and then slip in quietly. In fact, in that case I think a person should stay in the back of the church so as not to distract the community at prayer.

Things have changed for us here at St. Charles. Many Catholic parishes are so big that there are many Masses and people cannot get to meet each other. We, however, are small enough so that we can get to know each other. We can make a community out of ourselves with a little bit of effort. If we do so, perhaps those who come here as strangers will find a community, and that may help them to find their way back to active participation in the Church. Maybe it will also help us not to join the ranks of those who believe that they can be committed Catholics without coming to Mass on Sunday to worship God as a community.