

# Why Go To Mass?

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"To me nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overcoming as the Mass. It is not a mere form of words - it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth."

I couldn't think of a better way to start these comments than that quotation from Cardinal Newman.

Unfortunately, there are very many people, young and old, who do not appreciate the wonderful treasure that we have in the Mass, as did this eminent convert to Catholicism of the 19th century. There are many good parents disturbed because their children do not attend Sunday Mass. They have endeavoured to bring them up in the Faith, sent them to Catholic schools, and in spite of this they reject their Catholic heritage.

Concerned and responsible parents try all means to persuade a son or daughter to go to Mass. Sometimes they plead, sometimes they threaten. The Saturday evening or Sunday morning battle is a real and terrible cross for them. They suffer greatly, because they always hear the same old arguments, the same old excuses are trotted out. 'Mass bores me and why go to Mass when it doesn't mean anything to me?' The excuses are always the same, only the jargon is altered. They are in fact only slogans, and the trouble with slogans is that the more you repeat them the more respectable they become. In the end they usually go unchallenged, and this is their real danger. Yes, that is why we are continually bombarded by slogans telling of the benefits of soap powders, cigarettes and the like.

Slogans are not solid arguments; they are no more than defence mechanisms or excuses that serve to set up a smoke screen in order to fog over the real issue. Sometimes advertising agencies use words to express the opposite of their real meanings. How often you hear of fantastic bargains. My dictionary defines fantastic as existing only in imagination, unreal, perversely or irrationally imagined. And a well-known grocery chain says that they are fabulous. Fabulous! I ask you - of fables, historically incorrect. And as for that used car firm that says its bargain are incredible. well that simply means they are unbelievable. So, too, are slogans of all sorts. They don't hold water.

## A POSITIVE APPROACH TO MASS

If your children don't want to go to Mass, then don't answer their slogan protests with slogans of your own. Give them positive reasons why they should WANT to go to Mass. Let them see that they should go out of love rather than out of obligation. Let them feel invited and welcome to attend Mass rather than merely force them to go.

Of course, in the final analysis, each one of us has to respond to Christ's call - his personal invitation to attend Mass. Of course, Sunday Mass is obligatory, but unfortunately so many people look at this rather negatively instead of the positive way that the Church intends us to see it.

The Mass is Christ's gift to us. It is also our personal response to give to Jesus the love and worship that we owe to him. He first loved us and died for us. He is our Redeemer, our Lord and our Brother. Love the Mass, approach it positively, approach it as an invitation and not as a command.

So, parents, pray for your children who do not willingly go to Mass. Let them see that you attend Mass for the real reasons that count. Let them see that you love the Mass, appreciate it and would love to share this one hour a week at Sunday worship with them. Yes, Sunday Mass is obligatory, but even if it wasn't we should still encourage those we love to share with us at the Church's Liturgy.

Beware, there are some really dangerous amateur theologians on the loose these days. These people actually tell young people that they do not have to go to Mass. As far as I know, Sunday attendance at Mass is still obligatory. Those who would take upon themselves the terrible responsibility of saying that you are not obliged to go to Mass do not heed the teaching authority of the Church.

I am not judging these people or their motives. However, I do think it is sad and very dangerous for anyone to hold young people back from approaching the altar of God and the Eucharistic Christ at Sunday Mass. I believe their whole approach is a negative one. Forget the obligation bit and concentrate on the positive attendance at Mass through motives of love for Christ.

The Mass is man's ultimate response on earth to the limitless love and giving of God. How then, can anyone even suggest to anyone else to stay away from Mass?

Hunger for God

There is a lot of talk these days about giving witness for Christ. There is no greater way to witness for Jesus Christ and his Church which he loves so dearly than to stand together, in a very positive way and try to instil into our young Catholic sons and daughters, as well as our husbands and wives, a very real and deep love for Mass.

Although the negative aspect of obligation is real, we must never let it get in the way of our positive love for the Mass. When we rightly understand the Mass in this positive way, it will bring a new dimension into our lives. It will unite us with God and each other.

Today we hear a lot about loving Christ but not the institutional Church. Those who say this really mean, I do not love God's Church which Jesus Christ founded and died for, and which he sent the Holy Spirit to guide and protect. Really, if they do not love the Church instituted by Jesus Christ how can they say that they love him?

There is a real hunger for God in the world today. Jesus Christ lived and died to redeem man and bring him into his family - the Church. Of course it is an institutional Church and Jesus makes no apology about it. He instituted it at a tremendous price. He wants all men to belong to it. But he really wants us to belong to his Church through love rather than obligation. If only people would see it this way, that LOVE is the key word rather than obligation. what a difference it would make in our lives.

TRUST THE CHURCH

The history of the Church has been a long and tormented one. It has also had many high peaks of glory. There have been unworthy popes, clergy, religious and laity. But there have been heroes and saints in these categories too.

Often those who are outside the Catholic Church, those who do not accept Christ's personal appointment of Peter and his successors as his earthly vicar, are only too quick to judge our Church in a negative way. They see her bad points as the ones that loom largely in their line of vision. They are often not prepared to admit, in spite of the fact that this is often the very substance of their objections, that the Church is very human.

Of course the Church is human, it is of this world, made up of people like you and me, very human people. The Church is bound to our humanity.

The Church is Christ's and he has promised to remain with it until time comes to an end. Do not fall into the error of judging the Church by her human actions, the actions of her leaders and members, past or present. The signs of Christ's true Church are there for those who genuinely seek them.

To really appreciate the Church you must be inside it. If you look at a stained glass window from the outside of a church, you may judge it negatively. You only see a grimy and dull outline of the figure represented. It means little to you. Go inside and look at the same window and what a transformation you will find. The former dull outline takes on the clear sharp features of Christ. Colours shine forth from what previously looked a dark and grimy window. Yes, we can now judge that window from the positive side. If we judge the Church from a negative side then we will only see her, as that window, from the outside. But if we trust the Church and see her positively as we should, then we can take comfort in the words of Jesus who loves his Church and wants us to love it too. "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." (Matt. 28: 20).

Those who cut themselves off from the Church, cut themselves off from the family of God's people. They are, by their own choosing, outcasts. They are not cast out by the Church, they cast themselves from her. Small wonder that their lives become so shallow and empty. They wonder why they have become so bored with their lives and why they seem to be going about in circles of meaningless actions. It is because they need to be fed with the words of God. It is because they need to be nourished upon the Eucharistic Christ and filled with his grace. Yes, the Church that is holy, catholic and apostolic is an institutional Church and Christ instituted it by his life and sacrificial death.

### Responding to God's Love

Jesus came to help us and fulfil our lives. He came not only as our Saviour, but as our friend, as our brother. Christ came to draw all men to himself. He wants all men to come to him and his way of truth and love.

But Jesus wants us to do this in a positive way. He wants us to love him with our free will and respond to his call. 'Come to me all you who are heavily burdened and I will refresh you.' (Matt. 11:28). The promise of Jesus is truth itself. He promises us peace of mind and heart, a share in his life in this world and the next.

Even in his earthly life, Jesus saw some of his followers leave him. This saddened him. He still is saddened when men and women, boys and girls, choose not to follow him. He saw the whole future of his Church. He saw the heresies and schisms which would divide it. He saw the ingratitude and sinfulness of those who ignored him. But, despite all this, he still came and died for them.

Some people find it hard to see why Jesus would come to us and why he should die for us. They find it hard to believe how important it is to re-enact Christ's life and love in the Eucharist, the Mass. I guess it is hard because of the very greatness of the gift itself. The gift that Jesus has given to us. Yes, it is hard for some people to believe that God can be so good.

In a manner of speaking, you could say that even God reached his limit. What more could he give us? He could do no more to prove his love and win our hearts. The greatest wound we can inflict upon Jesus is to refuse his great love.

God gave us free will and we may refuse his gift of the Mass and the Eucharist. We can refuse his invitation to belong to his family, the Church. Yet, in spite of this, the fact always remains, GOD IS LOVE (I Jn. 4:9), and he offers us his love. He offers us the greatest gift he can offer - himself - his own body and blood in the Eucharist. He offers us a share in his divine life. God's giving is the source and foundation of our giving. And our giving finds its ultimate expression in the giving of the Mass. In the final analysis, it is up to us. We have to respond to God's love, to answer or to refuse the call of Christ.

The Mass is our ultimate response to God's limitless giving. By ourselves we could never respond. It could only be properly answered by the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Our Lord made that answering call of love, worship and complete surrender and we make his answer our own when we join in the celebration of Mass. We say his words and we make his actions ours when he, the divine bridge, joins earth to heaven in the Mass.

The Mass is the greatest act of love we can offer to God. The blood of Christ which speaks better than that of Abel (Hebrews 12:24), is that strong cry which carries us sinful men across the boundless chasm to God. It is the strong cry we make to God's love for us. The Mass is God's greatest gift to me, and in the Mass we make the cry of the Blood of Christ our own. The Blood of Christ in the Mass is our cry and God hears us.

#### TELL THE WHOLE WORLD

Some time ago at our hospital in Sydney, a man in his early forties lay dying of cancer. He was not a Catholic and had not practised his own religion since his early days at Sunday School. He shared a room with a devout Catholic man suffering the same dreadful disease. The man who was not a Catholic could not understand the attitude of peace and tranquility shown by the other, as they both only had a few weeks to live. They spoke to each other, about their beliefs and the non-practising Christian decided to ask the hospital chaplain for instructions in the Catholic Faith. "For twenty years I lived at . . . and none of my friends ever spoke to me about their religion," he said. "I can see by the faith of my companion that his religion really means a lot to him. I wish I had a faith like his."

After some instructions the priest baptized him, confirmed him and gave him the Eucharistic Christ. The transformation that took place in that man was miraculous. The Brother who was nursing him asked him if he had any regrets. "Yes, Brother," he replied, "but only one. I have never had the honour of attending Mass."

The Brother arranged to have Mass celebrated in his room the next morning. He died during the following night. That man had only attended one Mass in his whole life, and that on the threshold of eternity. What joy and peace of mind it brought him!

That man was disappointed that his friends had never spoken to him about the Mass. How many of us can honestly say that we want to share this wonderful experience with those around us who do not understand the beauty of the Mass. Do we fully appreciate the Mass ourselves? Isn't it true that you and I, whether we be concerned parents, single, priests or religious must speak out and emphasize the importance and real value of Mass now? If Mass really means so much to us shouldn't we tell the whole world about it? Of course we should, and especially to those who no longer go to Mass.

We must be positive about all this. Don't answer slogans with slogans. That is no argument, that is not being positive. Tell them how important the Mass is in our lives and what they are missing by not attending. If Mass means so much to us, then let us find ways to stress the positive values of it. What better way than the example of going to Mass through the positive motive of love rather than obligation.

This means that we will love the Mass and appreciate its unmeasurable worth. It won't make any difference to us whether the Liturgy is too long or too short; whether it is celebrated in English, Italian, Chinese, Latin or whatever; whether guitars or organ accompany the hymns be they rock or Gregorian; whether there be singing or not; whether the homily is boring or exciting; whether the celebrant be trendy or old fashioned. True, all of these things are important aspects of the Liturgy and should be well prepared in order to make the Liturgy as palatable as is humanly possible.

But these things are not the essence of the Mass, and if one or other of them does not please us, it is certainly no excuse to stay away under the pretext that such a glorious encounter with Christ can be meaningless.

### The Bread of Life

Jesus came on earth to give us a better life. By our Baptism we are admitted into the life of Christ - we live in Jesus and he lives in us. This is our belief and surely we would want to be with him and have him with us. What happiness it brings, to be able to share his life and want to be in his presence. No one would have to tell us to go to him. We would want to run to him and meet him. We encounter Jesus in the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

St. John's Gospel tells us that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. "Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life but anyone who refuses to believe in the Son will never see life: the anger of God stays on him." (Jn. 3: 36).

Yes, Jesus tells us that he is the Bread of Life. How can we be unwilling to go to him and eat this life-giving bread? Jesus was most explicit and emphatic about this. All those who believe are born again and made partakers of the divine nature. Yes, we share Christ's own nature, his own life. We continue his life, all of us, one with each other.

Jesus Christ founded his Church and the members of his Church continue his life on earth. Adam lost life for the human race. Without Jesus we are dead to God's life and that is the only life that really counts. We are the Church, the people of God, and we are spiritually united with God and each other, because we have been made one with Christ. We are members of Christ, we share his life. And where do we find this sharing in his life? Every time Mass is celebrated, there is Jesus with us, waiting for us to share in his life in the Eucharistic banquet. The Mass is God's great gift to us. The Mass is life-giving. The Mass is our very life - our very spiritual life.

### ADVICE TO PARENTS

The positive approach is the realization that the Mass is man's ultimate response on earth to the limitless giving of God. And this limitless giving of God is something that we only begin to understand when we observe it already active in the deepest reaches of God's inner life, where he, too, gives to man a share in his own divine nature. It is at Mass that we offer sacrifice to God the Father. That sacrifice is most acceptable to God because it is the Body and Blood of his Son Jesus Christ. This we offer with, in, and through Christ. Then we eat the Eucharistic banquet - a covenant meal. This, in effect, seals anew the Covenant which God made newly and eternally when Jesus redeemed us. It is through the Mass - this great Covenant meal - that we are nourished by Christ, and this unites us and gives us the grace to live according to the spirit of Christ.

Some time ago a distraught mother wrote to me that she had tried all means to get her sixteen-year-old son to go to Mass on Sundays. This is not a unique problem. Perhaps even you, dear reader, have undergone temptations against your faith and the Mass. Perhaps you still have them.

My advice is pray to God who loves us so dearly, ask Our Blessed Lady to ask her Divine Son to give us a great love for his Church and the holy Mass. These lines appear in the foreword of the New St. Joseph's Missal, and I hope they will give you comfort and encouragement:

"It is the Lord who has created us; it is the Lord who saves us; it is the Lord who loves us and loved us first. Only a proper participation in the Mass can make us realize these things and also that everything we are and have and live by is a gratuitous gift of God."

I sincerely hope that these comments on the Mass will not only help the mother concerned, but others like her, who, perhaps, have not realized the value of the positive approach to this problem. Hopefully she and others may understand that it is not so much the obligation of attending and sharing in it. With this positive approach to Mass our lives will certainly be enriched, for how could it be otherwise when we are so close to Jesus who has given us so much and calls us to share his love and life?

So my advice to parents whose children refuse to go to Mass is this: Go to Mass yourselves, go willingly without grumbling, without reproaches, without threats. Go to Mass and pray for your son or daughter. No one can force a person to go to Mass, but we can tell them how great the Mass is. We can show them by our example how much we appreciate and love the Mass.

We can stress the positive approach. We can tell them about the positive values of the Mass. We can let them see what a positive force the Mass and the Eucharist mean to our own spiritual lives. Without Christ nothing is possible. It is in him that we live and have our being. (Acts 17: 28).

### The Mystery of Christ

Pope Paul, in calling us to participate in the renewal and reconciliation of the Holy Year, 1975, reminds us that this is the time for spiritual life and all growth in the spiritual life expands from this divine Centrepoin.

Now is the time to examine our spiritual life and see if it is Christ-centred. It is very important to maintain a vital link between life and liturgy. The Mass is Christ's great gift to us. In the Mass we celebrate the mystery of Christ, the mystery of the Lord who saves us. This naturally prompts us to gratitude and generosity which are expressed, not only during the Liturgy of the Eucharist (thanksgiving), but also in our daily, individual and social conduct.

It is very true that all we love becomes a part of us. And if Jesus Christ is not a part of us in the Mass and the Eucharist, then we certainly do not love him. But he always loves us, yet he won't become part of us unless we really want him. He wants us to go to Mass and receive his Body and Blood and share in his life. Then he will become a part of us, a real and living part of us. And when he becomes a part of us our lives will never be empty again. Our lives will never be meaningless and without purpose.

Yes, we do love Jesus. As we participate in the Mass let us ask him to become part of our lives. We want to be fed and nourished with his sacred Body and Blood. Let us ask him for a greater love of the Mass. Let us see it with a positive approach.

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