

## The View from the Pew Part VII: Closing Thoughts

Hopefully the past few articles have given you a little insight into Mass and helped you to think a little more about why we do what we do at Mass. As so many of us learn about Mass at an early age, sometimes it can be easy to go on “auto pilot” the rest of our lives and we can forget that each part of the Mass has so much meaning.

I'd like to close with a few thoughts on Mass in terms of questions that sometimes arise in the minds of people, and how to get the most out of Mass.

**1. Liturgy Changes, sort of.** The Mass we celebrate today is quite different than the first Mass of the Last Supper and the early Masses celebrated in house churches, and different from the Masses celebrated in Renaissance Europe. The Liturgy will also have some differences based on each parish, or in parts of the world. What does not change are the readings are the same, and the Real Presence of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist is the same. As such while particular celebrations of the Mass may vary, the heart of the Mass never changes.

With that in mind, it's important to remember the Holy Spirit is at work. A big change was making liturgical changes with the Second Vatican Council, and just a few years back some more wording changes were made in terms of translations of prayers used at Mass. The way we celebrate Mass will continue to change as time goes by, so trust the Spirit and remember there is no “perfect” way we celebrate Mass until we are in God's Kingdom where there will no longer be Mass, for we will be in the presence of the Lamb of God for eternity.

**2. Try to stay focused.** We've all been to Masses where we might not like the music, or the priest starts preaching and we go to our “happy place” as one brother priest put it while we were in seminary. But remember we aren't at Mass to be entertained. Hopefully the music and the message help, but remember this is a sacred time where God is going to speak to you. So enter into the moment; try to be silent or speak in a low tone if necessary; put away the cell phone before Mass; listen attentively to the words of the readings and the Eucharistic Prayer; think about your struggles and sins in your heart and turn them over to God knowing how much you are loved by God.

**3. Explain the Mass to children.** Explaining from an early age what happens can do so much for children to learn to love the Mass. Talk to them about the readings; explain why we pay special close attention when the priest holds the bread and the wine above the altar; help them to understand what we are doing when we receive Communion as we celebrate the Eucharist and that Jesus told us to do this in His memory; point out to them the tabernacle and the altar. Consider going for a walk around the church after Mass too to point out the statues and stained glass and altar and explain their meaning.

**4. Be welcoming.** We are a “big tent” Church. Remember our Gospel from just last week; “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have

repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind..” (Luke 14: 12-13). Over the years, people can experience bad things at Mass; the “what are you doing in ‘my’ pew” look; the stare for having a fussy child; the “where have you been since Christmas” look on Easter; or coldness directed towards newcomers. Remember Jesus tells us what we do for others we do for Him, and what we do not do for others we do not do for Him. We have frequent visitors at Mass, and it’s so encouraging to see so many stay after Mass to converse and celebrate the “Minnesota goodbye” and to be welcoming of those who may be visiting.

**5. Remember each celebrant is a little different.** The celebrant of the Mass, or the priest, will always celebrate Mass slightly differently. There are things we never change such as the words of the Eucharistic Prayer. But of course homilies differ, as does liturgical style; for in the Roman Missal there are points where it says “he says in these or similar words” or “he bows” but doesn’t specify how much to bow, or what specific words to say. I’m thankful in that I haven’t run into too many self-proclaimed liturgy experts at Saint Joe’s as out there every so often you have people who read blogs who want to watch a priest carefully on how he says Mass. Over my priesthood, I’ve had some good conversations with people, gotten good feedback, but also unfortunately a time or two have had some very hurtful things said too behind my back or in a nastygram; most every priest has because some people inevitably like a slower or quicker or more “traditional” or more “progressive” liturgy. Prior to ordination like all priests I took liturgy classes and went over a tape with a liturgist. But I’m also continually learning too as each parish can have some unique traditions. As my first spiritual director put it we as priests are God’s imperfect tool who offers the sacrifice, or as Saint Paul would say a fool for Christ. We try our best, and I’m in regular contact with other priests including an expert on liturgy and am always open to conversations with people. So if you ever wonder “why does the priest do that”, talk to him or send the priest a note. We each have a different liturgical style but the goal for us all is that the way we celebrate Mass brings people closer to Jesus, because it’s not about us, it’s about pointing the way to God.

**6. Find what works for you.** There are nearly 200 parishes in the Twin Cities area alone. Many people stay in the same parish for many years. And that’s a good thing. But sometimes the way liturgy is celebrated at one parish really speaks to a person and helps them spiritually. Maybe you find a liturgical style that really helps you on your faith journey at a parish. I’d hope that would be Saint Joseph’s, but if it’s not, you have to do what is best for you and your own spiritual journey. Of course, if you are married or have children, those folks have an opinion too so talk to them too. But also remember if you are a parishioner at a parish, that is your parish and also the parish of thousands of other people. Liturgical styles develop a bit over many years; in some cases a priest may have to make major changes due to liturgical abuses, but that’s not the case thankfully in any parish I’ve been a part of. At the same time when considering liturgy, remember, priests come and go, and just as I have a different style from Fr. Paul Jarvis who was different than Fr. Tom Hill we all will differ a bit. My hope is that people stay committed to their parish too, expressing opinions on administration and liturgy, but also remembering they are part of a large family.

My own philosophy as a priest is to try to always defer to the community I am serving, and make changes if needed after I've been in a parish for at least half a year. The only changes I've made at Saint Joseph's were to get rid of the ropes that were blocking off some of the pews on Sunday evenings, and then to move the Sunday evening Mass to 7 a.m. as there is no early Mass in our area but multiple Sunday evening Masses, and being the only priest here I have much more energy and can offer Mass more effectively at 7 a.m. rather than returning at 6 p.m. I can honestly say it's such a joy to be pastor at Saint Joseph's because I followed some great priests before me, and we have a strong and energetic community who loves Mass and is committed to creating liturgies that help people on their faith journey to glorify God. Bill Bradley, our director of music and worship is an amazing man to work with as are the many people like Bruce Falkenberg who has been a dedicated sacristan for more than 30 years and the small army of volunteers who make liturgies happen.

If you are reading this, thank you for coming to Mass. I truly hope Mass does for you what it's supposed to do, namely be a bridge between heaven and earth and help you on your journey towards sainthood.

May God bless you!

Fr. Paul