

As something we celebrate every week, and indeed that is celebrated every day, have you ever thought about why you are here at Mass?

For some, it maybe started when we were kids; and was just something we always did. Others entered the Catholic faith later in life. And ideally, what happens at Mass is a moment where we are brought closer to God.

Not too long ago, a parish in the diocese of Arlington, Virginia, Our Lady of Sorrows, decided to answer this question with a number of parishioners sharing their stories in a little book called simply "Why I Go to Mass." The book was published just last year and you can read it for free online, or get it at Barnes and Noble.

Among the stories shared, included the following:

Why Do I Go to Mass? The short answer - because Jesus draws me there to give Himself to me: Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Eucharist.

But how I got to that point takes a little longer...

A three-year-old girl holds her Daddy's hand as they walk into church to make a "visit" to pray for healing after an eye doctor appointment. Church, Mass - that was the backbone of our family life.

A seven-year-old hears Sister Lucienne say, "Your First Holy Communion Day will be one of the happiest in your life." Receiving Jesus, truly, really present, into my heart was incredible. I was in awe! Some say that a seven-year-old can't appreciate the fullness of the Eucharist. I disagree.

A seventeen-year-old goes away to college at a huge, public university after twelve years of Catholic school. "You'll lose your faith!" my counselor said. And though I struggled and wrestled with faith at first, it was Jesus in the Eucharist who continued to draw me - to the Catholic student chapel, eventually to daily Mass, and to a strong community, some of whom remain my best friends fifty years later.

A twenty-eight-year-old new mom just lost both of her brothers in a car accident. It was at Mass, and especially in the Eucharist, that I found consolation and peace.

Four children in six years, always someone fussing at Sunday Mass, hard to concentrate. Long commute to work - no daily Mass. It was a dry time, but Jesus was there waiting.

Finally, an empty nester and remembering how life was always better when I was able to go to daily Mass. First a couple of days per week, then more, until it became an everyday choice - and I miss Him when for some reason I cannot go.

Jesus is always there for me - in the words of the readings or the prayers, and always under the appearances of bread and wine in the Eucharist. He is waiting for me, drawing me to Himself.

How can I say no? That's why I go to Mass.

And from a parent: My son once expressed his sentiments about going to Mass this way: "If the God of the Universe is willing to meet me at Mass every day, who am I to say I'm too busy?" I agree with him...there is nothing more meaningful than Mass.

And from a teenager: Although I'm only a teenager, I still enjoy and look forward to going to Mass every Sunday. I look forward to going to Mass because I love being able to hear the Gospels, readings, and the homily and to then be able to, if I concentrate, hear God speaking to me, telling me what it is that He wants me to do this week to be able to grow closer to Him and to fulfill my part in His plan. I know that it is God speaking to me when I hear something said at Mass or a thought comes out of nowhere, and I get this overjoyed, bubbly feeling in my chest, in my heart. I get that feeling of revelation, and I finally understand what was said or what I just "heard." I sometimes feel lost, confused, worried, and overwhelmed wondering what it is that I am supposed to do to help make this big world a better place, and what I need to do, as a young person, to use my gifts and talents and things that God has blessed me with to be a servant of Him and to be a good person. What I have learned that is if I pray and pay attention at Mass, God will tell me what I need to do. He will actually help me to make these decisions that were so hard to make before.

I've realized that in going to Mass and listening to God, I don't have to be scared and stressed and worried and confused, God will always be with me

and He will help me. I do not have to go at it alone. That is why I go to Mass.

And lastly from another parishioner: One of the most memorable lines I ever heard in a sermon is that the Church “is not a Museum for Saints but rather a Hospital for Sinners.” Mass provides some of the minor healing I need each week.

Any system left to itself will become more disordered over time. This is the concept of entropy, the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Think of a room that is so clean that it is spotless. Close the door, come back after a week, and don't be surprised to see a layer of dust upon all the previously immaculate surfaces.

Mass is a weekly dusting for the soul. Within the Gospel and Homily are weekly reminders, mini-lessons, in how we can become more Christ-like. Mass provides an opportunity to reflect upon how to live better.

We are inundated with messages to care for our physical and mental health. Health experts admonish us to exercise regularly and eat a healthy

diet. Cognitive scientists coach us to engage our minds, practice gratitude, and connect with others. Consider though, how much more important it is to tend to our spiritual health.

One of the ways God has provided to build spiritual health is the Mass. We travel to church, express gratitude to the Lord, and connect with fellow believers. It is one of God's wonders that in caring for our spiritual health, we improve our overall health.

And yet, we all know there will come a time when our physical bodies will reach their end. Weekly Mass is a reminder of why and how we can prepare our souls for the journey that lies ahead.

Indeed, with us every step of the way is our Lord, and what a gift Mass gives us to prepare for the journey that is our lives.

In our first reading for this week, Isaiah gives us the image of the mountain. It's something we see elsewhere in Isaiah too, such as Isaiah's 2nd chapter where all the tribes go up the mountain, and Isaiah 11 where the ox and bear graze together and the child plays by the adder's lair, that of the dangerous snake, for on the mountain all are together and there is peace.

And today, we are told that the Lord of hosts provides for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wine, juicy, rich food and pure choice wines. Coming to mind for the people who heard this would be Mount Zion where God meets His people, and the Temple; but these are of course imperfect for there is still the problems we have as humans of sin and division. However, what there is is a perfecting; we are heading to the mystical mountain, the place where conflict dies away, where God transforms things. This mystical mountain is where humanity is fed. It is where, we are told the veil that veils all peoples, the web woven over all nations is destroyed.

For us as Catholics, its good to think about the place where we are fed as the Mass, which is where all this imagery comes together from Isaiah. It is where we are fed, where we come together as people from different walks of life. So how do we hold on to an appreciation for Mass and convey that to others?

As a starting point, this is where we receive God's help and healing. Life is hard, and we face anxieties, we face battles with sin and temptation. When we come together at Mass, it's a reminder of how the Church is not a

haven for saints but a hospital for sinners. We do not come here to proclaim our holiness; rather we humbly seek God's help and healing. We receive the comfort of others; the reminder of the love of God in the penitential rite; and are reminded we are one bread, one body as we gather around the Eucharistic table.

Second, there is the word of God. After we still our hearts and turn our sins and struggles over to God thinking of His love and mercy, we listen to God's word. Vatican II's document on the liturgy states "it is He himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church." As the lector proclaims, we listen to the words and often something will hit home, or resonate in our hearts. Ideally the homily helps to that too as the preacher tries to apply things to the lives of the people.

Third, we are fed. Christ was a unique human being, and what happened on Good Friday was a unique act in the past. But Christ is also God, who is outside time and lives in the eternal present. Past and future are always present to Him, meaning the actions of Christ on Calvary and Easter Sunday morning are eternal acts that are made present by the power of the Holy Spirit again and again. And this is what happens in the Eucharist. The



power of Good Friday, the sacrifice that takes away our sins and heals us and transforms us becomes present and available to us. Beyond this though, the Resurrection is made present. Think of coming to Mass as being both present under the foot of the cross and watching Jesus give His life for us, but also standing with the women who greeted Jesus on Easter Sunday morning: “This is for you. I give my life to you.” Jesus is saying at every Mass “receive my strength.” It’s Jesus’ sacrifice made present again to feed us; not recalled or re-presented, but rather that connection to the life-giving power of the saving events that have the power to make all things new. Tangibly, Jesus becomes our food; bread is our daily nourishment, as we say “give us this day our daily bread” and wine is the blood of the grape; blood is equated with life, and for Jewish people this was very important. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us a share in the divine life of God by giving us His own blood; His plan is to help transform us, and to help us become partakers of the divine nature, loving perfectly as the Father, Son and Spirit do; and achieving once and for all the image of all being together on the mountain that Isaiah speaks about.

This is why we receive Communion at the end of Mass, and it strengthens us for our mission. We are meant to go out into the world to proclaim

Jesus; we are meant to grow in love and holiness. It's not easy, but God gives us that food for the journey. Receiving Jesus, hearing God's word, we are then filled with Jesus, and just as we die without physical food we are spiritually dead without our spiritual food. As Saint Augustine said, "Believe what you receive, receive what you believe, become what you receive."

Admittedly it can be easy to be distracted at Mass; we have so much on our minds, and sometimes maybe worrying about things, or get distracted by something at Mass, or maybe we aren't crazy about the music or even perhaps the homilist isn't grabbing our attention. Remember though Mass isn't entertainment like going to the theater; rather it's about sanctification, and we can prepare by just stilling our hearts a bit, trying to stay focused, and above all else remembering how much we are loved. Some people feel unworthy to be at Mass, or think it's for the holy folks; but again, we are all sinners. It's why I wash my hands with water before offering the sacrifice. Jesus is here with us because there are no saints in the pews, only sinners to a greater or lesser degree.

And one last note, may we try to do all that we can to make people feel welcome, remembering all are truly welcome here - it's not just a song we

occasionally sing. Again, those key words in our first reading: “all peoples.”

I am always thankful people are here; maybe they get here a little late because of the train or having to end to kids. Maybe a little toddler is having a rough morning and is a bit fussy. I’ve appreciated since I’ve been here how our parish is really welcoming; I don’t sense people are getting the stares in some parishes of why is your child screaming or why are you in my pew. And you often see people visiting after Mass and conversing with old friends and making new ones. What a beautiful thing that is, and may it continue to be something we challenge ourselves to make a way of life.

Finally, we of course want the pews full. Again, this is for all people. The best way to do this is to use gentleness and mercy but also persistence, but gently and gradually. Shaming people for not going to Mass won’t work; but have them know they are always welcome and give them an invite. And look for ways to talk about the Mass. Using deep theological language when a person isn’t aware of all that happens at Mass generally won’t work, but maybe look for opportunities to talk about why we go. Speak of the love and mercy of God, and of the peace we get at Mass, and of how we are fed and how this is a commandment of Jesus to do this in remembrance of Him. I’ll often say to folks Mass is not for God’s benefit but

for our own. For at each Mass, Jesus comes to meet us where we are at and is waiting for us.

As I've shared before, I love mountains. The journey there though can be long. I hope to return to Banff next fall, and you drive through a lot of flatlands making your way through North Dakota and east Montana and Saskatchewan before you finally see mountains west of Calgary. But I remember when I finally got there it was incredible just taking it all in. One woman when I visited in July of '19 saw my Minnesota plates as I was just outside of Banff taking some photos of the mountains at sunset, and she said you drove all the way from Minnesota? My reply was yes, because I wanted to see this, pointing to the awe inspiring sight in front of me. It is beautiful there, even if driving does take a long time, and I highly recommend it. But far more beautiful will be what eye has not seen, ear has not heard: a vision on God's mountain that will be something beyond our wildest dreams. The road there is a lot longer than the road to Banff or Yellowstone, but it's a road well worth traveling. Thankfully we take that road with Jesus as our navigator and our fuel to keep us headed in the right direction. May we together meet Him every week at Mass, and never forget

what a beautiful treasure Mass is as a preview of what awaits us once we get to the top of the mountain.