For many of us, Mass is something we have experienced much of our lives, but have you ever thought about why you go, or specifically what happens here when we come to Mass?

Preparing for the homily this week, I did a search for Catholic responses to that question. And here were some of the responses. And in collection of random responses with no names given, here were a few:

Said one 9 year old: “I go to Mass because I love God and I love to receive Holy Communion. Sometimes, I don't feel like going to Mass, but I go anyway with my family. I enjoy it because I am with them and it makes me comfortable. Also, I go to Mass because I love Jesus and I want to accept what He gives us. I want to love Him and I want to be with Him in heaven forever.”

Another person noted: My family and I go to Mass to be with Jesus. It is that simple. Worshiping the Lord is what we all expect to do on Sunday. This formal worship with our parish gives our lives direction and a purpose.

Although our weekdays are filled with multiple overlapping schedules, Mass reminds us of a bigger routine going on in our lives - our journey to heaven. God knows we have a long way to go and that we require many stops in the confessional, but He is kind and merciful. He is not bothered by the noise and disturbances we caused when our children were all under five years old. He is not bothered when we are not in the most prayerful mood as we walk through the church doors. He takes us where we are and speaks tenderly to us and feeds us selflessly and generously. As a good Dad, He knows what we need, and He always provides.

Our family takes up less pew space now as some of our children have gone off to college. Now it is their turn to make the personal decision to be with the Lord on Sundays for Mass and maybe a few weekdays, as schedules allow. They are finding that God's comfort and peace always reminds them that they have a home in our Church and in the Mass.

And another person talks of being lost and found again:

Why do I come to Mass? That's such an interesting question, and it's one that required considerably more introspection than I initially anticipated.

If I'm completely honest, my first answer, of which I'm neither terribly proud nor impressed by its superficiality, is basically, "I come to Mass because I've been told since I was a child growing up in the faith that that's what I'm supposed to do. Simple as that."

But as is the case with many questions of consequence, there's more to it. Like lots of young people, when I was in college and probably for a few years thereafter, I drifted away from making Mass any sort of a priority. For starters, my mom wasn't looking over my shoulder, making me feel guilty about not going (which numerous punchlines suggest is a mandatory skill set for Catholic and Jewish mothers alike).

On top of that, during those years I also started wandering a bit aimlessly in terms of my spiritual life. Some would call it "finding oneself," but looking back that's probably too generous, too noble sounding a characterization. In fact, I was treating my relationship with God like the process of selecting a neighborhood in which to live. I wanted comfort and safety—well, sure, who doesn't? But I also wanted convenience and a relationship that

would...meet my wants, my needs and most importantly that would do so on my terms. With the passage of years, life did what life does. It threw at me a succession of scarier and scarier situations that left me completely overwhelmed...concerns about illness, employment, family relationships and a host of others. Each and every single time that happened, I found comfort in returning to Mass...experiencing the Eucharist...spending purposeful, focused time with the Maker of the Universe, who also quite incomprehensibly knows every hair on my head...every burden that haunts me and every joy I celebrate in every moment of my life.

I come to Mass because I find things there which I find nowhere else. I find peace, wholeness, connectedness, and quieting serenity—things against which the modern world rages at every juncture...things without which the human soul withers like a flower petal in the sun.

Do I make it 100 percent of the time? Nope. Truth be told, I'm not sure I could name more than half of the Holy Days of Obligation. But that's the gig. I'm terminally imperfect. Nevertheless, every time I come back, the doors are open, and I'm welcomed. I'm forgiven for my failures, and above

all I'm loved...perfectly. I can't imagine life without that Gift, that respite, that sanctuary.

That's why I come to Mass.

And lastly, one other person talks about meeting Jesus at the altar. As they put it, "…no matter how much I would like to pretend otherwise, I struggle with my faith. What is it I believe? Why is this not easier? I get confused, feel lost and want to just give up. "I'm just not good enough; maybe I don't belong here."

Those are the times I most need to go to Mass. Those times of confusion are when I most need to go to Him. He can handle my confusion. He can handle my doubts. I actually don't need to have all the answers when I walk thorough those doors! Just walking in can be a tremendous "yes" to His invitation. And with each "yes," I get closer to genuine answers, not temporary ones. Just walking through those doors means I am more open to the healing He provides, the strength He wants too share, the love He gives me always.

Even when I don't feel it.

Life is hard and complicated and often there are difficult questions where it's hard to see a way out of uncomfortable, even painful situations. Going to Mass does not "fix" these situations; it doesn't necessarily answer our questions. But going to Mass can make it easier to breathe, to help me realize I'm not alone even when I feel alone; it gives me an opportunity to rest in Him, and take Him with me when I leave.

When I am lost, going to Mass can help me remember that He knows where I am. I am not lost to Him. He is right there. He knows that I don't have the answers. I only have questions.

Why do I go to Mass? Sometimes I go because life is hard and if I listen with my often confused heart, I can hear His "I know" and His "I'm with you."

What a gift we have in the Mass, and this week our Gospel from John's 6th chapter gives us a look at what happens each time we come.

John does not have what is called an “Institution Narrative” at the Last Supper, the point at which Jesus takes the bread and wine and tells the apostles to do this in memory of him, though He does have a long talk Jesus gives at the Last Supper. However what the Eucharist is all about unfolds over John’s 6th Chapter, and this week we are invited to reflect a bit upon some of the components of the Mass. And I’d like to hit on 3 this week, namely why we come through the door, and the two parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The first part, as to why we come. Our Gospel begins by telling us of how a large crowd follows Jesus. They sense something special in him. As put by that one person, I come because the doors are open, I’m forgiven, and I am loved. Deep down we all have things we are battling; our sins, our anxieties, the things going on in our lives. And like that person, like the people in the Gospel, we sense that Jesus has the answer. With all going on in our world and our lives, God knows we need Him, and so this is where in a unique way we come to be with Him through His Word, and His Body and Blood.

The second part is His Word. John tells us that Jesus sits down with His disciples. In the ancient world, a seated position was that of a teacher; people. would gather around and hear the teacher speak. This teaching authority of the church is seen in the bishop; it's why we call a cathedral a cathedral, as it takes the name from cathadra meaning the chair where the bishop's chair is, as his primary role is to teach the people. We begin Mass with the Liturgy of the Word and reflecting on the readings. As we sit with the readings each week, there is often something from the readings that strikes us a little bit, as they are timeless readings. The homily is then meant to help people think about the readings at a deeper level; a homily can focus on something from the reading, or the Eucharistic Prayer, or be catechetical meaning looking at faith and morals. Each preacher has a different style, and admittedly some weeks it works better then others, but I often start with a story from real life, and then try to think about what I am going through and others might be going through and apply it to the readings. The idea is with the first part of Mass we still our hearts a bit and learn from the Lord in His Sacred Word.

The third part is how the people are fed. Jesus asks Philip where can we get enough food for the people; he says this is pretty much impossible,

even if we had 200 days worth of wages where could we feed all these people. And then Jesus looks to the boy with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. This is seen in how we bring up the gifts to the altar. A small amount of wine and water along with small hosts certainly won't do much to fill someone up physically if they are hungry. But what is happening here is we also give of ourselves to him. The meager food that the boy has is brought to our Lord who performs the miracle. We give the bread and wine too in the procession of gifts and we give of our offering in the collection. Like those people sharing why they come to Mass, God accepts us as we are. God does not need us, for He created us. But what we do is we give what we have and have it elevated. What is happening is the transubstantiation of bread and wine we help create as humans into the Body and Blood of Christ. We have a feeding of the soul which is meant to transform us. This is why when we come to Communion, we hopefully feel that peace Jesus wants to give us. We are freed from sin. We are reminded we are loved and not in life alone. We are brought closer to Him.

When the priest stands at the altar, he assumes the role of Jesus. It's why I wash my hands and also bow before the altar before proclaiming the Gospel; I pray silently asking that the Lord would be with me and cleanse

me of my sins. It's also why I wear vestments. It's so my individuality is covered up by the vestments. It's my job to point towards Jesus, and to take His place as His unworthy servant at this altar. However while I can't multiply the loaves and fishes, I do call upon the Spirit and when I say those words of the Eucharistic Prayer, and we have Jesus giving thanks in the Gospel too. We believe the bread and wine are made holy into the Body of Christ. Not just a representation, but in the same manner as at the last supper. Again, this is so we can be fed spiritually. It's why at virtually every Mass people always pay close attention at that moment when the host and chalice are held up; they know Jesus is now with us in a special way.

This is why it is also so important we have an understanding of what makes Mass unique. This is not to say there are not powerful worship experiences in other churches, but Christ created one Church, and in a special way the Eucharist is with us at Mass. So if you ever think well gee how can this happen that we have the Body of Christ, for this was done a long time ago, or what makes Mass unique, note how the Gospel wraps up - Jesus says to the apostles to gather up the fragments left over so that nothing will be wasted. Even in early Christian celebrations, we have saints writing about

how the fragments were also collected and brought to those not there, the needy and the poor. So if this were just some symbol, why would one bother collecting up the fragments left over? So indeed there's so much here reminding us of how Jesus is really with us each time we come to Mass in a unique way.

Lastly we will go back down the mountain, and this is why hopefully Mass has a real effect on us. Jesus performs the miracle, and remember we come as we are and offer Jesus what we have, but we want to open our hearts to change. Obviously we'll continue to have our battles, but we want see the changes. Sometimes Mass can become habit, and we don't really enter into it as we should; or we start skipping a week here or there and don't see it's importance. Ideally what happens is having thought more deeply about the Word of God and experiencing the Bread of Life, it begins to help us battle our sins better, and equips us to then go into the world at the end of Mass - to be more patient, to work more towards unity and charity, to speak and testify to our faith. For as the apostles feed the people, we feed one another.

So as we prepare to come up for Communion, may our eyes and hearts be opened, knowing that Jesus wants to feed us at our deepest level, and when we think maybe I'll stay away or take this week off, or when we talk to people who have fallen away or just don't care about Mass anymore, let us remind them that Jesus wants to meet them and feed them too, and they always have a seat at the table, but on our own we'll never be truly fed or full. But through Jesus and His Church, our hearts truly find rest and our souls will be filled to abundance.