

The Spirit-Led Mass

Making the Mass Come Alive

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Introduction

A dead branch on the old oak tree that overshadows our deck broke away from the trunk this November morning. It fell on the little decorative painted drop-leaf table which holds a plant in the summer. It separated the table top from its legs.

It was an event of absolutely no consequence, except that we were pleased to see the unwanted branch finally give up its hold on life. As for the table, it held no particular sentimental value for us.

It was just an accident of nature. But for some reason it made me reflective and pensive as I looked at the broken table flattened on the deck, held captive under the weight of the fallen branch spread over it, as if in an embrace. Had the branch - approaching its final fate - eyed that little table for a long time with the intention of meeting it some day?

I wasn't there when it happened but I wondered if, at the last moment, the branch had uttered, "Watch out!", and the table replied "Oh, no!" as the branch fell from its twenty foot height.

There is a time for everything under heaven, as the Teacher said in Ecclesiastes. My birth and death for instance. Both are acts of nature. The union of my parents and the deterioration of my health. All natural! All part of the natural things that happen on this earth every day.

When my parents gave me physical life, I began to live. When I reached a certain age, I die. Is that all there is to life? No! Something else happened in between those two events. I became a believer in Jesus Christ. My natural, physical life had more meaning than simply birth and death.

There was something about the branch and the tree and the table that suggested a metaphor. For Jesus had fallen upon us from the heavenly tree, and embraced us. It seemed quite unnatural. We certainly didn't expect it. For hundreds of years God was never this close to man. But then, in the fullness of time He came among us and entered our lives as one of us. He was the Word with God who was God. This mysterious Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the Father's own children.

In this writing I want to share some thoughts about the Holy Mass. Since the time I returned to the Catholic faith I have been attempting to make my attending and attention at Mass more meaningful. Like many Catholics I found myself sleep-walking through the Mass. In this writing I'll point out some things that have helped me make the Mass a much more devotional and rich experience. And here I am speaking about the ordinary form of the Mass.

The Roman Catholic Mass is the central and essential expression of the Roman Catholic faith. If we are not fully appreciating the Mass, we are lukewarm Christians, and you know what our Lord says about such people. Another famous 3:16 verse of scripture. (Revelation 3:16). And so, I want to walk through the Mass thoughtfully and especially suggest ways to make the Mass a much more devotional, prayerful and fervent experience.

As we attend Mass Sunday after Sunday, what do we observe? What is the general quality of Catholic participation in the Mass? Sad to say, so many Catholics go to Mass untouched and unmoved, listening to the priest without interest, performing gestures lackadaisically, distracted, or in a state of passive participation which lacks thought or meaning. Many come to Mass only because it is a moral obligation. And while they don't miss going to Mass, they miss the spiritual meaning and graces of the Mass completely.

What is the Mass? The Mass is heaven on earth, as Scott Hahn explains in his excellent book: "The Lamb's Supper". The Mass is not about the choir or the songs. It's not about the sermons or homilies. It's not about the richness of the Scriptures, or the friendly fellowship. All of these may be poor or outstanding. Of course, it's better if they are inspiring and rewarding.

But what always stands out and inspires is the presence of Christ and what Christ does at Mass, for Christ Jesus is really present in both the celebrant and participant; the priest and the person in the pew. Christ is before us, with us and in us at every Mass. We go to Mass to encounter and experience the living Lord Jesus at every Mass. "I'm going to Mass to be with Jesus," said the elderly Italian grandmother, who captured the very essence of the Mass in her simple words. What a wonderful way to enter church it would be if we really believed and acted as if this were true? We go to Mass to be with Jesus!

I prepared this devotional study of the Mass with some of the same reflection and pensiveness, because I thought of all the Masses I went to in the last seventy years. All those Masses, and what did they mean? What impact had they had on me?

Here I was, still going to Mass and struggling to understand; to stir up interest and enthusiasm. I don't like to do things that I don't understand.

I felt I needed to do something about my own struggle to make the Mass more meaningful and inspiring. I even stopped going to Mass for awhile out of sheer frustration and boredom. When I confessed this sin, the priest would empathize with me and ask if I had a valid reason for skipping Mass. When I said that I just didn't feel like going - for I was too embarrassed to tell the truth - he would just encourage me to go and gave me my pardon and penance. I left the confessional wishing I could sit down and really explain to the priest why I didn't go to Mass. But I felt that neither he nor I could really do anything that would make a difference. So instead I started writing about the Mass. Often writing is helpful because I find that the Holy Spirit can speak to me in what I write.

I wanted to tell the priest that I worked hard to make it more meaningful. I pinched myself to stay alert. I prodded myself, I prayed aloud, I pronounced all the words, even the ones the priest said. It didn't work. I still didn't feel excited or inspired by the Mass. Something was missing. Was it me? Was it the spiritual condition I was in? Was it the Mass itself? I discovered it was both.

As I looked around at Mass, it appeared that something was absent for most other people also. Some didn't recite or respond, some didn't sing or speak at all. Most seemed to want to get it over with, and I was sure that many were just going through the motions. I knew what that felt like myself. Only a few faces seemed to be fervently glowing as if God was real to them. I started to discretely initiate conversations with those I knew, asking what they got from the Mass. Most didn't feel much enthusiasm about their experience. I could see some felt embarrassed by the question, so I stopped asking.

In this writing I'm attempting to describe the thinking I went through to make the

Mass more meaningful and making it come to life. Of course this wasn't my doing alone, rather it was the work of the Holy Spirit who answered my prayer. He showed me how the Mass might be prayed more fervently, intelligently and devotionally. He showed me that the Mass is, most importantly, a prayer; a prayer still enacted by Christ Jesus our Savior who said, "Do this in remembrance of me," and "I have desired to eat this Passover with You." It is especially an invitation by Jesus and the Holy Spirit to pray to the Father, which Jesus makes with us, who are Spirit-guided, Spirit-filled, and Spirit-led people.

The Spirit-led Mass can only come alive if two elements are addressed. One is the way the Mass is presented or "delivered". But just as important is the spiritual state of the people who come to Mass. I'm therefore suggesting both a renewal of the way Mass is offered, and a renewal of the Catholic who comes to Mass.

The description of Catholics as Spirit-guided, Spirit-filled, and Spirit-led people is important. A Spirit-led Mass, or any Mass, is most meaningful to Catholics who have encountered Jesus anew as adults. They are born-again Catholics who have experienced the spiritual awakening work of the Spirit of Christ in their lives, as Jesus described to Nicodemus. (John 3)

They may be cradle Catholics but at some point in their lives they experienced a vital renewal of their faith, in which the Lord became more personally real, and scripture became alive as the living, active Voice of God. They came to know that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work". They came to realize that "the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

We say that the Mass is a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It is a sign of grace. A "signum", a proof conveying that what is signified is authentically happening. It does not merely remind us of Jesus and his great sacrifice enacted 2000 years ago, like a crucifix does; but it is truly, really the Lord Himself and His sacrificial enactment taking place. It is especially the perfect worship of the Father and the accomplishment of the salvation of all people for all ages. Jesus is the *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*, the Father's perfect Lamb who takes away the world's sins, both Priest and Offering. The Mass is the *Mysterium Fidei*, the great mystery of our Catholic faith.

In the Mass Jesus reminds us that we,

"also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:5-6,9-10)

So, the objective of this writing, which I truly believe was Spirit-inspired, is to describe what changes need to take place in the Catholic person, and a possible alternative way of presenting the Mass.

CHAPTER ONE

I think you would agree that none of us had a choice about being born. We had no choice about the pre-birth dispositions with which we were born, nor the post-birth environment or family composition, dynamics or deficits which would affect our character and psychological personality all our lives. We didn't choose our country or nationality, the color of our skin or the time in history when we entered the world. We may not have chosen our Catholic religion either. All of these and more are givens.

As for the time in which we were born, those of us born in the 20th century and now living in the 21st, have witnessed “paradigm shifts” in the way that people understand themselves, life, morality, beliefs and values. This shift in perspectives is fundamentally different from those of us who are “Baby Boomers”. The world has been radically changed by scientific advances, amazing technology, the digital environment and the internet, with both positive and negative consequences.

One significant consequence is that people live in virtual reality, a reality in which they are able to form relationships without ever meeting face-to-face. They can meet and date, form friendships, make enemies, and develop life-long mates online. Technology has shaped most aspects of our lives. And because of this pervasive technology, psychologists use the term I.A.D. - Internet Addiction Disorder - to refer to the growing number of children, teens and adults who spend exorbitant hours a week on the internet, often suffering depression and anxiety, a sense of emptiness and detachment due to the lack of personal face-to-face relationships. A whole generation of young people are lacking interpersonal skills. This doesn't bode well for marriages and families.

In view of these changes, what has happened to the religious and spiritual life of people? What do people now make of an ancient book like the Bible, or the historic and traditional faith we call Catholicism? How do these fit into this changed worldview? How do we Christians live and connect to this secularized digital world? And what does it mean to have a spiritual life in such a world?

These changes undoubtedly contribute to the current worldview of widespread indifference to organized religion, atheism and agnosticism, and makes Christians vulnerable to doubts and losing a grasp on spiritual realities and God. We may try to preserve our faith by making our churches a closed and safe fortress, cut off from the world, holding on to beliefs and practices which more and more appear alien to the culture around us. And in all this cultural diversity, divisiveness and disconnectedness, the way we identify who we are becomes more difficult. We can often feel detached from ourselves within, and from others without. We can lose sight of what it means to be Catholic.

What happens if we don't attend to our soul, spirit, and heart - that inner spiritual part of the self? We may feel incomplete, unfulfilled and imperfect in a profound way. An incomplete spiritual identity makes it very difficult for us to answer the basic questions of life. “Why?” “Why *am* I?” “Why am I *here, alive and living*?” “What purpose or meaning can I give to my life?” “Where am I going, and how do I get there?” “What happens when I die?”

What's wrong with the Church?

I grew up in a church with Italians, Irish and Polish people. It was the 1950's. It was the Latin Mass, novenas, stations of the cross, Eucharistic adoration, May crowning, the rosary, first communions and confirmation, no meat on Fridays, Corpus Christi processions, and monthly confession. I learned a clear identity which set me apart from my Protestant