

In the heartland with Bishop Pates – March, 2019

Center of Family Faith Life... Sunday Worship

A friend of mine with three small children related that he is befuddled by many of his contemporaries who take very lightly, if at all, the fulfillment of their responsibility to attend Sunday worship with their families. He wonders why their priorities are so different from his. Number one for him is the Sunday gathering with his community of faith. All other activities will fall into place.

Those missing Mass point to games and activities for their children, which seemingly take precedence. Others identify the opportunity for time off and rest in the midst of otherwise hectic lives. Some will cite an incident/experience/reaction to the broader Church or parish priest. Still others sheepishly admit, “I got out of the habit” and have not resumed what was so valuable in their lives.

Surprisingly, but thankfully, these parents send their children to Catholic schools and religious education. Yet they fail to follow-up with further practice of worshiping their loving God in the weekly cycle of Sunday Mass.

The Church from the earliest, apostolic days established the practice of the “Lord’s Day”. On each Sunday, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus were memorialized or made present. It became the foremost “ticket” on their journey to life eternal with the ever living God.

While the Church holds Sunday worship as a serious obligation for all of us, it is vitally important for us to recognize also the significance, value, beauty of the liturgy so that we are attracted to it by its magnetic spirit and meaning.

The first part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, proclaims the mind and heart of God. It is not merely an account of Israelite or Christian history. By the power of the Spirit, it is God's Word spoken in the moment to touch our lives in the call to conversion. We are invited to adapt our lives accordingly in order that they might be in line with God's will. Who of us does not need such guidance?

The second part of the Mass is the liturgy of the Eucharist. Therein, in alignment with the Last Supper, bread is transformed into the body of Christ and wine into his very blood. The death and resurrection of Jesus, the Paschal mystery, is made present not repeated. And we the priestly people become one with Jesus in the offering to the Father the sacrifice through which our salvation is won.

Then, from the altar of sacrifice we are fed with the very body and blood of Jesus. This remarkable personal gift unites us together in the one Lord, to be his body present in the world. We are challenged to scatter evil and promote love, truth, justice, and peace. Moreover, on a personal level, as we consume the nourishing bread of Jesus, we take on his attributes- kindness, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, understanding, selflessness, sacrifice – the very stuff of holiness.

Certainly, we have to come to grips with those issues and other priorities that interfere with our Sunday worship. Might they not begin to fade in the face of the benefit and meaning of the Eucharist, of Sunday Mass? Literally, I cannot think of 100 reasons which take priority over regular Sunday worship.

Families which feature Sunday worship as central to their common life benefit from a regular routine of the same Mass each week. Such promotes engagement with parishioners and common parish activity, further enabling community, a central and rewarding feature of parish life.

Recently, in my weekend travels, I have experienced wonderful moments in the celebration of the liturgy. They were truly uplifting.

In the rural communities of Imogene, Adair, and Leon, the Sunday Mass is centered around families and faith development. The families come together for Sunday worship planned to include participation of all age categories. Following Mass there is a hot breakfast often prepared by the Knights of Columbus and especially enjoyed by the kids with their friends. The morning concludes with faith formation. For most of the families and especially the young people the morning is the highlight of the week.

On a recent weekend, I had the great joy of experiencing confirmation at four parishes: Audubon, Woodbine, Dunlap, and the parishes of Shelby County at Harlan. The Masses were well celebrated especially by our high school confirmands. The prayer was spirited, uplifting, reverent and engaging. We prayed as families in one voice. I could see being actualized the timeless vision of the Second Vatican Council in the full, active and conscious participation of all the praying community.

My friend has an extraordinarily important point in that it is essential to make Sunday worship the Number One Priority in family life. Initially, it may draw protest from the younger generation. Sooner or later, I trust, they will come to appreciate it as an “eternal” gift. I strongly encourage those families not participating in Sunday liturgy to do so. Is there any better time to begin than during the Lent or Easter seasons?