

FAITH, *Alive!*

Getting more out of Mass

IN A NUTSHELL

Getting more out of Mass begins with immersing ourselves in the story of salvation.

It requires giving more of ourselves – practicing the art of self-giving love not just on Sunday mornings but in every encounter we have in our families, in our work and in our homes.

Perhaps it's time to consider a more active role at Mass as a lector, choir member or altar server. ✠



Tennessee Register file photo by Andy Telli

Members of the Church of the Nativity in Spring Hill, Tenn., above, celebrate Mass on Christmas Eve before moving into their permanent location. Below, the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation in Nashville exchange the sign of peace during a Mass.

TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY CNS

In a recent address, Pope Francis noted that liturgical education is an unending process. Pope Francis reminds us that liturgical fruitfulness is not merely a matter of participating in the Sunday Mass but attuning ourselves to pray fruitfully.

It is necessary for us to learn to pray the Mass so that we discover that “the worship of God in our lives cannot be relegated to something private and individual, but tends by its nature to permeate every aspect of our existence,” as Pope Benedict XVI wrote in “Sacramentum Caritatis” (No. 71).

How can we approach the Mass, open to learning to practice a eucharistic life?

Getting more out of Mass begins with immersing ourselves in the story of salvation. The Bible is not a textbook of moral behavior. Instead, the Scriptures provide an encounter with the living God mediated through human speech.

As the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation notes, “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body” (No. 21). Whether we pray the Scriptures in the liturgy or in the privacy of our homes, we are performing an act of worship.

This immersion into the Scriptures is not reducible to reading the Bible cover to cover. It is learning a way of reading grounded in the four senses of the Scriptures: the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical.

The literal sense of the Scriptures relates both to the background of the text, while also attending to each and every word of the Bible. The literal sense opens up the reader to an awareness of God’s activity in history. The Bible is a historical book, showing how the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob became involved in time and space.

Still, the Scriptures are not just about what God has once-upon-a-time done. They’re also

about what God is still doing. Reading the Scriptures allegorically makes us aware of the coherency of the scriptural narrative.

The Old and New Testament are not different stories. They’re the same story in which God’s self-emptying love is fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the moral sense, we perceive the words of the Scriptures as immersing us into the history of this narrative – our lives are a rich space for the Word to enfold itself once again.

The anagogical sense leads us to desire anew God’s final action in history.

Preparation for Mass requires us to read the Scriptures in these various ways. We must know about what happens at Christmas in the Scriptures. We must see the birth narratives as fulfillments of the great prophecies promised in the Old Testament.

We must gaze with wonder at the humility of the infant in the manger, seeing how we too are called to empty ourselves in love. And we are to long for the entire created order to be transformed into Bethlehem, surrounded by the Holy Family, adoring in won-

drous silence the infant who created the world.

Entering into the senses of the Scriptures attunes us to long for God to act here and now. Just as God does at every Mass.

The Mass is the memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, where our crucified and resurrected Lord becomes present among us. We eat his body and drink his blood, becoming what we have received. But Jesus Christ isn’t the only one offered upon the altar. All of us are!

In Eucharistic Prayer 4, the Church prays, “Grant in your loving kindness to all who partake of this one bread and one chalice that, gathered into one body by the Holy Spirit, they may truly become a living sacrifice in Christ.” As the Church receives the sacrifice of love made present upon the altar, she is to become what she has received.

In this sense, when we go to Mass, we’re not just passively waiting for God to make this sacrifice available. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the work of God on behalf of the people. But, the liturgy is also the space where we offer the return gift of our whole selves to God.



Tennessee Register file photo by Rick Musacchio

“It is necessary for us to learn to pray the Mass so that we discover that “the worship of God in our lives cannot be relegated to something private and individual, but tends by its nature to permeate every aspect of our existence,”
— Pope Benedict XVI, “Sacramentum Caritatis” (No. 71).

When we sing at Mass, when we listen attentively to the Scriptures, when we pray for the living and the dead, we are offering ourselves as a living sacrifice of praise. In practicing this self-gift, every dimension of our lives is to become this sacrifice of praise. Not just during the Mass.

Getting more out of the Mass, in the end, requires giving more of ourselves. It means practicing the art of self-giving love not just on Sunday mornings but in every encounter we have in our families, in our work and in our homes.

The Mass, at least for now, ends. But, as our preparations for Mass make clear, attending the Eucharist is a dress rehearsal for what we are called to become at the end of all time: a kingdom of priests made to adore the living God. For ever and ever. Amen.

Timothy P. O’Malley is author of “Bored Again Catholic: How the Mass Could Save Your Life” and director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy. ✠



People raise their hands to pray the creed during Mass at Sagrado Corazon Church at the Catholic Pastoral Center in Nashville in 2016.

Tennessee Register file photo by Rick Musacchio

How can we make sure we're getting our faith's worth when attending Mass?

KELLY BOTHUM CNS

At some point in our lives, nearly all of us have been stuck in the wash-rinse-repeat cycle of Sunday Mass. We go to church, listen to the Gospel, receive the Eucharist, drive home and do it all over again the next week.

When we're operating out of habit, we're present but not really present. It's a shame, too, because active participation in Mass offers a special opportunity to deepen our faith and more fully explore our relationship with Christ.

As practicing Catholics, we know this. But some days are harder to engage than others, whether it's the drone of an underwhelming homily, the distraction of fidgeting kids or the weight of carrying heavy personal burdens.

So how can we make sure we're getting our faith's worth when attending Mass? Being open to change can be a good start. Sometimes, it's a simple shift, like swapping your regular seat in church for one with a different vantage point. If you're a regular at the 8 a.m. Mass, consider going to the vigil instead.

The consolidation of parishes in Lynn Palcic's diocese prompted the Bentleyville, Pennsylvania, Catholic to change up her regular Mass schedule. While she didn't expect it, she discovered the new faces – both on the altar and in the pews – gave her a fresh take on experiencing the Mass and developing community with others.

"Sometimes just going at a different time will shake up your routine," she said.

If you're struggling to fully participate in Mass, perhaps it's a sign to consider a more active role, Palcic added. Serving as an extraordinary minister of holy Communion or lector means assuming a hands-on role that can help you feel more connected. (The same advice goes for bored kids – being an altar server may help Mass feel more like a real thing rather than a nebulous experience.)

Music makes the difference for Joe Gawinski, 63, who has been singing in organized choral groups since he was in the sixth grade. He's currently part of the choir at St. Helena's Parish in Wilmington, Delaware. The choir learns new music each week to correspond with the readings.

"Often the priest will mention something in his sermon that corresponds to a piece in our repertoire," Gawinski said. "Our director will run to our music files and distribute a piece that drives home what the priest just mentioned."

Gawinski said singing in the choir helps him focus on why he's there, but the benefits of the music extend beyond the church doors. "During the week, all I need to do is think of a recent song title and the words transport me to a healthier place," he said.

Joanna Fitzmaurice of Great Falls, Virginia, uses the quiet time of Mass to reflect on the past week and think about the week ahead of her. Sitting in church with her husband and three children, it's easier to give thanks to God without the chaos of daily life to distract her. She also returns to the readings and Gospel as part of her reflection.

"If I can't get the message from the pastor I will reread those and try to get the message on my own," said Fitzmaurice. "I find it amazing that all around the world everyone is hearing the same message."

Rarely do we have to do anything on our own anymore, thanks to advances in technology that make our lives easier. But there's one place we can't be on autopilot, and that's at Mass. Our faith depends on it.

Bothum is a freelance writer and a mother of three. ☩

Food for thought

As Mass concludes and the congregation filters out, it's easy to move on to the next task, event or activity that the new week brings.

How can families keep the spirit of Sunday Mass alive throughout the week? Here are some ideas:

- Post scriptural verses throughout the house. Choose passages from the Sunday Mass readings and post in visible areas as a reminder that God speaks to us through his word. Children can even

choose the verses and decorate.

- Keep praying with the prayer of the faithful. Ask the parish staff to make available a copy of the prayer of the faithful. Each day pray one of the petitions to keep the intention alive in heart and mind.

- Have dinner discussions about the homily and/or readings and create family goals. Saturday or Sunday night after Mass, discuss the homily's message or the meaning of the readings. Decide how you can live out the Gospel message this week, individually and as a family. Check in midweek at

dinner to see how everyone is doing.

- Bless yourself with holy water. Keep a small font of holy water by the front door. Bless yourself as you enter and leave the house. Decorative fonts can be purchased at a Catholic bookstore or online, and parishes often have holy water containers where parishioners can fill up bottles to take home.

- Read the Mass readings in advance. Friday or Saturday evening, recite the readings, psalm and Gospel passage, available on www.usccb.org/bible/readings. For more context, find the passages in the Bible and read further. ☩