

The Lady Who Dared to Risk It!

Each year as the season of Advent begins, I am impressed with the lessons that the Church presents for our meditation.

The chance to begin once more the cycle of feasts that celebrate Christ's Paschal mystery brings with it new freshness, new hope, new excitement that the reign of God can indeed develop among men.

Last Sunday, as the year opened, we called out to God: "Rouse your power, and come to save us." (Psalm 80:3). In the Gospel, we were advised to "Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake!" (Mark 13:33). These two passages present a good picture of the balance that is needed as we stand before God: if one sincerely petitions God to come with His salvation, one must also be ready to see Him and to accept Him when He comes. Calling out to God is merely a meaningless exercise if we are blind and sleepy when He appears. Even worse is to think we know

what He will look like, only to miss Him when He comes in a different way.

Sunday's lesson, however, is not allowed to remain on the theoretical level. In typical motherly fashion, the Church quickly presents a concrete example of this balance. On Friday, she will ask us to recall the life of Mary and to learn from her.

By celebrating this feast so early in Advent, the Church presents Mary in her proper place in "salvation history." It was Mary who accepted salvation for all mankind. It was she who was willing to be the human instrument in a divine plan. Without her, the plan would have been thwarted. And yet, imagine Mary's confusion. She, like all other pious Jews, longed for salvation. She awaited the day of the Messiah. Now an angel — yes, an angel! — stood before her and asked her to be the mother of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. What could be more traumatic! Why me? I don't think I want to get involved. What would people say? It wasn't very reasonable. There wasn't time to think it over or send it to committee. She couldn't

even check it out with Joseph. God had come — and Mary was awake! She dared to risk the unknown. She dared to say, "Your will be done." She dared to let salvation happen.

In these weeks of Advent, our prayer will be filled with requests for God to come once again to His people. But do we really mean that we want Him to come? Are we really willing to accept Him when He comes, and in the form in which He chooses to come? Are we willing to do what He wants, to let Him run the show, to risk the unknown?

Certainly God is among His people today. But He does not always present Himself in the traditional forms. His needs are not always the traditional needs. We must be awake to Him as He comes, ready to meet Him where He wishes. And this is not easy. Only strong faith and the virtues of courage and fortitude can allow us to meet this challenge. May the Spirit come and make us ever watchful and ready, that we might not miss the Lord when He comes. "Maran atha: Come, Lord Jesus."

Guest Column

By Father Benedict Ehmann

Sunday Mass Is Still Obligatory

The Courier-Journal received several requests to reprint the following talk given by Father Benedict Ehmann, pastor of St. Michael's, Rochester, on Msgr. Joseph Cirrincione's radio program, Family Rosary for Peace.

There is something phony about this widespread absence from Sunday Mass on the grounds that you don't have to go if you don't feel like going. Maybe I don't feel like reading right now, but I'd better get on with it if this is required reading for an exam. Maybe right now I don't feel like going out because of the weather, but I'd better push myself if it means not disappointing someone who needs transportation.

We take this for granted in the ordinary conduct of life, do we not? Many was the time I didn't feel like practicing my music but my parents insisted, and my joy in playing piano now, makes me ever grateful to them. There is a lot of truancy from school these days but the conscientious parent will not defend his truant youngster. Are we to suppose that doctors and nurses, bus drivers and milkmen and newsboys and the clerks in the stores and the telephone operators and the TV performers are always feeling up to 100% par in what they are doing?

Religion means obligation, as well as love. The very word comes from the Latin word "to bind". So religion is, in the title words of an old hymn a "tie that binds".

You cannot be really religious without admitting to an obligation, a tie that binds you to God as God has bound himself to you. This tie is not to be subject to caprice and feeling. It binds me as much on blue Mondays as on happy Saturdays. I may not release myself from the duty of praying whenever I do not feel like praying. And I may not release myself from worship whenever it fails to appeal to me.

My favorite saying from the great mystic, St. John of the Cross, has something to tell us here. He said: "If you do not find love, put love there, and you will find love." And while I think he said this about interpersonal relationships, it can be as truthfully applied to the relationship between feelings and conscience in the matter we are discussing. If I do not find love for the Mass in my feelings, let my conscience choose to go anyhow, and I will find love, even in my feelings. How often I found this to work in my piano practice! Often I hated to begin; but once I did, it began to be easy and enjoyable.

It seems to me juvenile shortsightedness when youngsters maintain stubbornly that they get nothing out of the Mass. What this manifests is a closed mind and a meager faith. I'm not blaming the youngsters harshly for this: after all, youth is a painful time of dying, emerging from childhood into adulthood. But the harsh blame is on their teachers who absolutize these growing pains into fixed standards instead of helping the youngsters interpret their meaning in the light of sound psychology.

I wish to face now the quarrel of those

people who say that so loving a duty as assisting at Mass on Sunday should not be made into a law binding under pain of sin. I heartily agree that our emphasis should be on Sunday worship in a spirit of loving joyful presence in Christ to our heavenly Father rather than on fulfilling the requirements of a law that hangs like a threat over our heads.

The question, however, is about the prudent means to stimulate our people to gather in this spirit of worship. If the law on Sunday Mass were abolished, would this help to create the free spirit of worship, or would it tend to diminish still more the sense of awareness of God? If there were no law about Sunday Mass, would we have just as many people coming to the Sunday assemblies for worship? I hardly think so. Those who come joyfully and readily are not made less joyful and ready by the existence of the law. The others whose only response seems to be to law are at least drawn within the orbit of worship.

What happened to Friday abstinence may serve as an example. The United States bishops removed the law of Friday abstinence two or three years ago, keeping only the Fridays of Lent within the law. What has happened? Exactly what might have been expected to happen. The majority of people gave up Friday abstinence. Here was a test case of how an appeal to the sense of love in maintaining the Friday sacrifice did not succeed in improving the observance but reduced it. So would it be with Sunday worship if it were removed from the domain of law.

Editorial

Leave the Till, Man the Tiller

About a year ago Bishop Hogan called for the formation of councils in every parish as a step toward the eventual establishment of a diocesan-wide pastoral council. He urged each and every diocesan to take his "rightful share" in the responsibility of running the Church. All are invited "to collaborate" with him in the Year of Renewal.

Perhaps the greatest significance of the Bishop's request was that he called for all to be involved in a "completely spiritual approach" to the mission of the Church.

The words are clear, the opportunity staggering. For the first time, not only are priests and religious being asked to take a turn at the tiller but all the

laity also have been asked, or more aptly beseeched, to help guide this pilgrim Church.

True, some laymen have always been involved in certain operations of the Church — usually in finances. Needless to say, this practice not only excluded all of us who quake at the problem of handling a family budget but also created an idea that laymen should only be concerned with the things of Caesar while the things of God were someone else's province.

The Year of Renewal, however, is asking laymen to leave the till and man the tiller. Those on parish, regional and pastoral councils will be expected to concentrate on the spiritual and social

aspects of the Church in such areas as human development, total education and liturgy.

True, such responsibility may stir a sense of foreboding. It shouldn't. The Year of Renewal offers everyone the chance to present the same questions, doubts, suggestions, ideas that we talk about at the dinner table or in chats with friends. Every opinion is needed for all these ideas will be openly studied, channeled into workable form and will chart the course for the direction of the Church in this diocese.

A responsibility? Yes. Your responsibility? Yes. When you profess to being a Catholic you already own a piece of the rock.