

# The Mass and Teenagers

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always indicate a loss of faith in God at all — for the simple reason that many teenagers have never actually made a real act of faith in God. An act of faith in their parents' faith, perhaps, or in Sister's faith, but not their own — based on a personal realization of God and a personal commitment to Him. In essence, we are asking these teenagers to go to a weekly testimonial dinner for a Person they never even met, and certainly feel no need for.

Here, I think, is the real problem: bringing youngsters to a personal relationship with God. All the religion courses and all the homilies will remain as academic as Calculus unless one has a commitment to the Person religion is all about. And this faith-commitment is a calculated risk. The schools can supply the data, the calculation part, and try to show God's incredible richness, but the individual student is the only one who can supply the risk. It's surprising how many people fail to realize that. Their accusations seem to demand that religion classes either must have some magic formula to compel a "free" assent (which is a contradiction) or must resort to the methods of Dickensian workhouses to get — if not true inner assent — at least less sulky attendance at Mass. It can't be done.

But just as adults may overhastily judge that teenagers' lack of external religiosity is proof of no inner belief, teenagers do the same to adults. If adults' attendance at Mass at least seems to be a perfunctory and joyless fulfillment of form, if God is never spoken of in the home as a Person with whom the parents have a real personal relationship, the teenager assumes that, even for his parents, the 45-minute Sunday Mass is at worst phony and at best a deadened formalism. Perhaps the parent does actually pray daily, perhaps he does have a true relationship with God, but I wonder in how many homes a parent ever talks about it. Parents talk plentifully of their business and social relationships, but in my experience they rarely speak of their divine relationship. I wonder how many parents ever tell their children how they came to meet the living God. Unless this happens, for the teenager, religion is something unreal, to be endured three classes a week and once on Sunday until he gets away from home.

Of course they are wrong. Of course they are passing by the most fulfilling relationship a human being can have. But whipping a boy or girl to Church is like forcing a boy to go to a prom with a homely neighbor. He'll go. But there won't be much communication and little likelihood of personal relationship. And he's not likely to ask her out again.

I suppose what I'm really asking parents is: is that all you want? If your son or daughter went to Mass without grouching, would you be satisfied and forget the whole thing? Is that all Catholicism means? If so, that's the message teenagers have gotten.

### A CLARIFICATION

Now let's get one thing clear once and for all: I am not saying, "If you don't get anything

out of Mass, don't go." I have never said that. In fact quite a few boys I teach get a bit frustrated that I refuse to back down to that position. And yet countless parents tell me they've heard I teach precisely that. Nothing could be further from the truth but, like feathers in the wind, such false accusations can never be picked up, even by an article like this.

I've been accused also of saying Mass with hamburgers and beer — which is repulsive; smoking at Mass — which is even esthetically ugly; even saying Mass lying flat on the altar — which would take a bloody contortionist! I say this not merely in self-defense but in defense of the other priests, nuns and brothers in the diocese and across the country whom I've heard vilified in the same way. The whole matter would be silly if it weren't so divisive and so unjust, because so many people believe these lies without making the very simple effort to ask the person so accused if the accusations are true. What's more, why should the parent believe that a person who is unsalaried, celibate and dependent for the sake of the Church would undermine the very Body for which he's given his life? As Father Jerry Starratt, SJ, has said in another context, if that's what you think of us, "go get yourselves another set of vestal virgins."

This difficulty stems, of course, from the fact that the teenager — like all the rest of us — is uncomfortable with nuanced thought. All the qualifications drop out, even negatives, and he hears what he wants to hear.

I do believe that everyone has an obligation to worship God at least weekly — not because the Church says so, not because it's a mortal sin to miss, not because he'll go to hell. I go to Mass every week not because the third commandment forces me to — any more than I visit my mother in Buffalo because the fourth commandment forces me to. I do both because an honest recognition of my place in the universe obliges me to. I go, even when "I get nothing out of it," because I owe it to both God and my parents for what they've done for me.

The difference in the two motives is between the Law of the Hebrews which was written on stone and the Law of Christ which is written in our hearts. Before, I went to Mass because the Church "forced" me to; now, I go because I force me to. The key, of course, is that I realize my indebtedness. If there is any single reason I know that keeps kids from realizing their indebtedness to God and from an inner obligation to worship him, it is that they are so utterly spoiled. I find that teenagers take the gift of existence for granted just as they take their mothers' labor pains for granted. So much so that it never crosses their minds; much less do they reflect that both were gifts they did nothing to deserve. If one doesn't even realize that he's been given a gift, it's pretty hard to roll out of bed every Sunday morning to thank someone he doesn't even know is there. And if a teenager has never faced death or real want, if his complacency has never been seriously threatened, he has never faced his own finite

dependence. Who needs God? And, inevitably, who needs Mass?

### AND IT GETS WORSE

Add to all this the confusion in the Church. Priests and bishops "leaping the league" have become so commonplace they seldom make the papers anymore. Yet these are the very people who counseled youth to chastity and the sanctity of one's obligations to the Church.

Add also the very real (to the youngster) distinction between "Catholicism" and "Christianity." "Catholicism" means telling me all the things I can't do; "Christianity" means doing nice things for my neighbor — which is little different from the Lions' Club. Neither sounds worth getting up early for any morning.

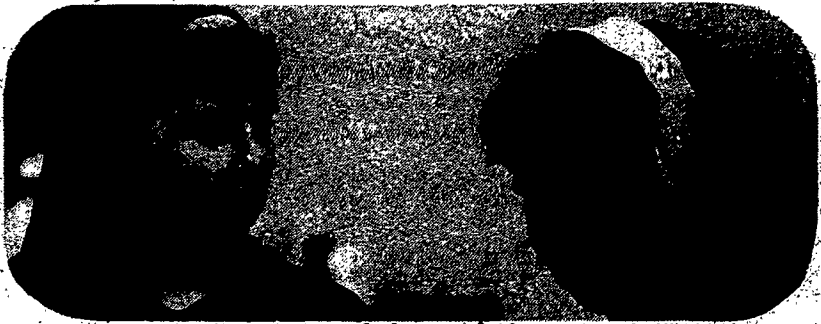
Even further, add the effect that Madison Avenue has had on a teenager's values. If one added all the hours kids have heard priests, nuns and parents speak of immaterial values and compared it to the countless hours that TV, billboards and movies have demonstrated material values, the Church would lose hands down. Every ad promises instant satisfaction or double your money back. As a result, teenagers expect the same from the Church. Sorry, Charlie. It can't deliver. You get what you give — that's the Gospel in a nutshell.

And yet that expectation remains in the teenager and is further aggravated by his awareness that his parents never read the Gospels and surely don't buy that jazz from Jesus about selling all you have for the poor, laughing at competition, being content with who you are and what you have. I wonder how many parents realize that the message of Jesus goes as counter to our American culture of consumerism as the message of the Hippies does.

But for me by far the most damaging argument kids have against the Church and Mass is the manifest lack of joy in both Church and Mass. A teenager, like any potential convert, can look at the Church and say, "Okay. If you've found the rock bottom truth of human life, if you've really found the Good News that sets you truly free, why can't I see it in the way you act? If I had that, I'd jump for joy! But you don't seem any more happy or free or alive than Protestants I know — or Jews — or atheists! — And the way you act shouts so loudly I can't hear what you say."

The Church they live in bears so little resemblance to the ideal Church they hear of in religion class, is it any wonder kids get the mixed-up idea that we want them to go to Mass only to keep up the attendance figures and the collections? They're wrong, of course. But that's not the problem. The problem is they think they're right and will not be convinced or converted by how we argue but by what we do.

Next Week: just what can we, that is the Church, do about the problem.



Sister Roberta [left], and Sister Patricia.

## Two Sisters Receive Education Dept. Posts

There are two new assignments in the diocesan Department of Education for the school year 1973-74.

Sister Patricia Pullman, SSJ, is assistant superintendent of religious instruction. Working directly with Father Daniel Brent, superintendent of schools, she will coordinate all phases of religious education in parochial schools.

Sister Roberta Tierney, SSND, is the new assistant superintendent for instruction. Her job will be to work with Father Brent on

curriculum development in all areas except religious instruction, to coordinate testing, and to provide in-service programs for teachers.

Sister Patricia for the past 20 years has been teacher and principal at St. Mary's, Waterloo; Guardian Angels, St. Stanislaus; Sacred Heart, St. Monica's and Corpus Christi.

Now in her 11th year with the Rochester parochial school system, Sister Roberta has been principal at St. Philip Neri's, St. Margaret Mary's, and at a school in Brooklyn.

## Religious Book Cdl. Cooke Installs Is Authored by K of C State Officers Hornell Sister

Hornell — Sister Mary Vincenza, SSND, religious education coordinator of St. Ann's Parish here has recently received word her book Creative Religion Involvement Programs has been published by Alba House.

The book presents a series of involvement programs designed to reduce boredom and routine in the religion classroom while stressing creative expression and long-term mastery of the material presented.

The major programs follow monthly themes which are primarily liturgical. The author, who has had wide teaching experience, has used these programs with great success in grades 7 thru 9.

### ALTAR BOY PICNIC

Addison — The altar boy picnic for boys of St. Catherine's will be held Monday, Oct. 8.

Cardinal Terence Cooke, chaplain of the New York State Council, Knights of Columbus, installed State Deputy Anthony B. Caramela and other state officers during the annual meeting Mass on Saturday, Sept. 8 at Grossingers.

Caramela is a past grand knight of St. Luke's Council in the Bronx. He has been active in parish affairs at Our Lady of Assumption in the Bronx and is president of

the Cardinal's Co-ordinating Committee of Catholic Lay Organization of the Archdiocese of New York.

The purpose of the statewide meeting is to have state officers and chairmen explain to grand knights and district deputies the various charitable and benevolent programs to be implemented in the local councils.



Cardinal Terence Cook, state chaplain of the Knights of Columbus [Center], installed newly elected officers of the group at the annual state convention held at Grossingers. At left is State Deputy Anthony B. Caramela, at right is the Knight's Supreme Director James E. Foley.