

The Mass and Teenagers

By FATHER WILLIAM J. O'MALLEY

As I said last week, the concentration of religion classes, CCD classes, homilies, discussions with parents should focus on fostering a personal relationship between the teenager and God — particularly by elders honestly sharing with their children their own relationship with Him. One ordinarily does not achieve a friendship with a Person, divine or human, by having a debate about him with a third party — although far too many religion classes and family discussions end up that way. One gets to know and love a person by acknowledging his presence, being with him a lot, sharing. But how many parents or pastors or pedagogues talk openly to teenagers about their own prayer life? How to begin, how often they do it, what kinds of things they say, what it means to them? Why should a teenager try to know God better when he has no knowledge (other than Mass — if then) that his parents communicate with God?

This realization of the God of the Textbooks is not just one of the aims of religious education; it is the aim. All talk of the Church is mere historical study, all talk of morality is merely ethical debate, all talk of liturgical innovation is merely realigning the lodge procedures — unless one has met God and cares about Him.

But meanwhile, while we're waiting for the Holy Spirit to arrive, we have to do something that will make the obligatory Mass more of a help toward God for the unwilling teenager than what it is far too often: an actual obstacle to meeting God. Those of us with faith know that, no matter how slovenly the performance of the Mass, no matter how dull and meaningless the prayers, no matter how bored the priest seems, the Mass "works" *ex opere operato* (automatically). But that's no reason to make it a test of the smoking flax and the bent reed.

Since the advent of English, much of the mystique and most of the poetry have been sucked out of the Mass. Twenty years ago even atheists could find themselves unwittingly drawn into the mystery of the Mass through the Latin cadences and even by the lusty, convinced singing of "Holy God We Praise Thy Name". To them it could be as fascinating as an Oriental rite still is to us. Now, however, we have a Mass with such outlandish phrases as "our spiritual drink" and such tame literalism as "This is the Lamb of God" in place of the far stronger, "Behold. The Lamb of God." I'm by no means advocating a return to Latin, but literally, for God's sake (and ours), let us have a Mass written by a poet rather than one that sounds written by a canon lawyer or a speculative theologian.

The answer is not merely to tack on a folk group or to turn it into a rock concert with the Mass part sneaked in while the kids aren't looking. Nor are two minutes of song practice before Mass enough; if choirmasters will listen, they'll hear almost no one singing back. Nor will kindly words from the pastor be enough to enliven that dismal mooring back of "and with your spirit." Just as the call to Christianity itself, the call to all priests and parish councils today is a call to *metanoia* — a radical inner change.

The climate of the Mass is exactly the opposite of the climate of a rock concert. One can sum up the cause in a single word: uptightness. People are afraid to respond heartily at Mass, afraid to stand out. They are still shy and somewhat intimidated even by the greeting of peace — in fact husbands and wives shake hands instead of kiss each other! One wonders what cold fear would spread through the congregation if the celebrant asked individuals to share their own insights into the Gospel reading with their brethren. And yet I was under the impression that the Church was to make one more free, more willing to risk, and therefore more alive.

In short, I believe the Mass must demonstrably be what it claims to be, a celebration — a communal celebration of our Brother's victory over death — a communal celebration that, ultimately, there is no sting for us in death or suffering or loneliness.

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(Practica Quaedam (Practical Suggestions))

1) **The Priest.** Since he is so focal and, at least for the moment, the only one visibly participating in the Mass, the place to begin is with the celebrant. No matter what prayers we provide in the Mass, he needn't say them like a zombie. I've preached at Masses where the celebrant read the prayers with all the deadening objectivity of a news commentator. In fact one time as I waited in the sacristy to preach and the visiting celebrant droned on, the pastor came in and said, "Isn't that voice awful?" And I said, "Why don't you tell him that?" But the pastor was understandably unwilling to hurt the priest's feelings. And yet what of the feelings of the 500 people he was "celebrating" with?

The devil in me has sometimes prodded me to suggest that celebrants should ask their congregations to register their honest approval or disapproval of the homily and celebration by the degree of their offering in the collection basket. It's a silly idea, but it might stimulate both celebrant and congregation.

Like everything in life, the Mass must have both its joyful and its solemn moments. What if the priest were to ad lib a bit buckishly occasionally to the congregation? Whenever I've done it, there are no great disrespectful hoots of laughter — merely a warm smile that spreads and adds a bit to the communion we seek together. But if the priest himself is uptight, self-defensive, insecure, it is not likely that he will engender much life in the Mass or in the congregation. If he takes himself too seriously so will the congregation. A priest needn't be an actor, but he can't be — or even appear to be — intimidated by his audience. If he is, he's a living denial of the Gospel message he preaches.

Solemn is not the same as funereal. Nor is solemnity communicated through either a witless sing-song voice or a rushed, dull, routine voice. I grant from experience that saying Mass every day, over and over and over, can lessen its impact on a priest. For most of the Sunday congregation, it is the only Mass of the week; for the priest it's probably his 10th or 11th. But if every priest paused for a moment, even if only before the consecration, and realized for himself that he, an ordinary man, was once again summoning the Architect of the Universe between his fingertips — there would be no need for dramatic tones. His conviction would come through to the congregation, and it would rekindle their own convictions.

2) **Homilies** must, of course, be relevant. But what does "relevant" mean? Surely it doesn't mean preaching against drunken office parties the Sunday before Christmas. Surely it doesn't mean hip talk or references to Saturday's ballscores. Relevant means relating the statements of the Scripture selections to the actual personal psychological and spiritual needs of these people. It does not mean making people in rich parishes ashamed that they have succeeded; it means giving them help to keep from being enslaved to their comfort and to the promises of the American Dream. In a poor parish it means encouraging struggle without one's detesting what he is now.

Paradoxically, the relevant homily relates one's problems to the unchanging: how pitifully petty one's grudges are in the face of death,

how self-indulgent is one's guilt when set against the background of the Old Testament — the sucker God who returns again and again to pick up the prodigal Israel, how painfully blind is one's self-doubt in the face of the selfless act of love for him that the crucifix testifies to.

Whether the parish is rich or poor, whether it is immersed in the 21st or the first century, the gut issues are exactly the same: self-distaste (abetted now so cruelly by the ideals projected by advertising and competition), loneliness, the need to love, the need to overcome self-protectiveness and risk loving in return. Perhaps few teenagers feel a gut need to worship once a week, but few will deny the deep need to be reassured — even more often — that they are indeed worth loving.

Finally, since I have been insulted so often in the last 40 years by rambling, ill-worded, say-nothing sermons, I have personally resolved never to give a homily that I haven't written out. Perhaps some audience contact is lost by having it "read" at them, but at least the congregation can smell the midnight oil and know I've thought carefully about what I'm saying. I find the best help in writing a homily is to presume that the congregation is not interested in the slightest in what I'm going to say; such an attitude makes me work harder to make them want to listen.

The attitude of the priest and the homily are quintessential to enlivening the Mass. But there are a few other small things that would help.

3) **Standing-sitting.** Perhaps it's a mite sardonic, but I sometimes wonder if all the standing-sitting-kneeling was injected into the Mass simply to give the huge silent congregation the illusion that they are at least doing something. Surely they didn't do it at the Last Supper. Would it be so sinful to have the congregation sit through the major part of the Mass, even the Gospel, so that they can concentrate, and kneel only at the consecration and after Communion? However, I grant that at a dull Mass the movement at least keeps one awake.

4) **Hymns.** In nearly every parish where I've ever said Mass, the hymns are pitched so high that they are accessible only to coloraturas. We all know it, but no one does anything about it. "They're all written in that key." Then transpose them. "I don't know how." Well, let's hire someone. It's worth it.

Also, far too many of the hymns I hear are either too difficult or too dumb for one to care to learn them. Wouldn't it be enough to get a "canon" of about 10 hymns the congregation likes and finds easy, and forget learning a completely new one every week? The enthusiasm with which one joins in depends not only on the strength of his belief but also on the pleasure he gets from singing this hymn. There are precious few hymn-pleasures in the missalette.

5) **Length and sameness.** My last suggestions are a bit more potentially inflammatory than the foregoing. But they are based on the premise that Mass should conform to the worship-needs of the people and not vice versa. I back these suggestions with rather good authority that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." For this reason I believe that, except for uniformly committed, small congregations used to prayer, no Mass should go longer than a half-hour or so. The old show biz cliché is "always leave them wanting more", and it became a cliché simply because the ages have proved it so true. Yet we smother congregations with too many readings and prayers for them to get a single, coherent realization from the total experience. I hope that approval can soon be found to accomplish this simply by dropping many of the parts of the Mass that are verbatim repetitions every week — in order to focus clearly on its three peak moments: Scripture-homily, consecration, and communion. One major problem with Mass for teenagers and others is that one can feel he's watching a rerun of a TV episode he's already seen rerun a thousand times. We must remember we are no longer dealing with simple peasant faith.

Next week: A suggestion for the structure of a more streamlined Mass.