

Insights in Liturgy

Daily Mass: A Penitential Practice?

By David E. Nowak

Last year at this time the editors of the Courier-Journal drew our attention to a prominent Lenten practice. Their captions read, "Mass Seen Chief Lenten Discipline" and "Lenten Daily Mass 'Something for Myself'." Those interviewed remarked that daily Mass during Lent is a "form of self-discipline," a "time for private prayer," and "my extra effort." Meanwhile, diocesan liturgists gasped as fifteen years of liturgical renewal passed before their eyes.

Especially during Lent many Catholics of deep personal piety approach the Eucharist as a private, ascetic routine, rather than as a communal celebration of our redemption. Father Aidan Kavanaugh has pointed out that many Christians have been led to believe that daily Mass is "a discipline through which they seek to coordinate their lives." For many, the celebration of our faith has been reduced to a penitential observance. The quality of our praise has become secondary to the quantity of our attendance — piling up Masses in a never ending quest for spiritual self-confidence.

On the contrary, the eucharist of Mass is a celebration that presupposes a congregation already prepared for communion with God. "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God" gathers a people already worthy to share in the Supper of the Lamb as the commemoration of our dignity and hope in the Lord Jesus.

The eucharist, while a central aspect of our devotional life, should not be celebrated only for the sake of private devotion. The Order of Mass is not an external stage and props for playing out individual devotional observances. When the eucharist is limited to propitiation for the sins of individuals, we inevitably lose the high value of one eucharist embracing all.

The eucharist is a sign of our common faith. It is a climactic expression of our transformation already begun in Christ. The eucharist is a renewal of the Father's gifts to His people and our grateful acknowledgement of His wonderful work in us who believe.

This is not a time to impose self-centered attitudes on a relationship we could never justify to ourselves anyway. Eucharist is a time to shed our best efforts, to grow out of our self-doubts and insecurity, and simply bask in the light of the Father's immeasurable love.

The eucharist is always more than our own self-analysis read back to us. It is more than a method we employ for sustaining pious sentiment. It is not a self-improvement course designed to help us master our appetites.

Our participation in the eucharist is not a harsh self-emptying, but our time to be filled. We gather at the Lord's Supper to feast, not to fast. Our eucharistic praise should leave us loving and hopeful, not sorrowful and unworthy.

To approach the Mass as a penitential practice reduces our participation to a private debt we owe for our sinfulness. Then, it begins in our sense of loss, dwells on our

separation, and leaves us poorer than we were before.

Eucharist, however, should begin in our hopefulness, revel in our possibility for communion with God, and restore us to unimaginable riches.

We must be watchful against the tendency that our liturgical practice slip into public opportunities for private prayer. The liturgy of the New Testament is a sign of our commitment to gather in common, in one faith, and in one Lord.

Our gathering is our proclamation to the world that our lives mean more than our individual efforts. The whole in Christ is greater than the sum of its parts. We rejoice in something and someone greater than we could offer alone.

We rejoice in what God has already given, keeps alive in us, and reveals most often in the folly of our resolve to "do something for myself" this Lent.

Our eucharist reminds us that we are already a holy people (*plebs sancta*) gathered before the Table of the Lord not in fear and trembling, but with hearts overflowing and spirits soaring. Holy gifts for holy people is not leftovers for late-comers.

Perhaps our celebration of the Mystery of redemption could be heightened this season not by more frequent attendance, but by more fully and consciously participating when the entire community gathers on Sunday to praise the living God.

Business in Diocese



Dennis M. Kehoe

Dennis M. Kehoe, St. Michael's, Lyons, was sworn in to practice law in a ceremony at Nazareth College recently. He is an associate in the firm of Brandt, Kehoe and Parenti, working the firm's Lyons office.

He is the fifth of the nine children of Mildred and Leo Kehoe of Watertown to go into law. Two of the other four Kehoe attorneys live in the Rochester diocese — L. Paul Kehoe and his family in Wolcott and Sharon Kehoe, who is an assistant district attorney in Monroe County and lives in Brockport.

Dennis and his wife, Karen, and their daughter, Rebecca, reside in Lyons.

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