

Wandering into Sunday Mass

By David Gibson
NC News Service

A friend told me how her attention was captured during a recent Sunday Mass by a teen-ager sitting near her. The teen-ager was suffering from a long, debilitating illness. And my friend said that she became preoccupied with the teen-ager during the Mass, praying for the youth's family while wondering and asking God why this illness had occurred.

Perhaps you'll say that my friend's attention was wandering during that Mass. It was, in a sense. But it wandered into the community of God's people.

I think my friend was drawn out — drawn beyond herself — by the worshipping community. This isn't unusual. For there are times when people feel God mysteriously addresses them during Mass through the others with whom they worship.

I would even say that my friend actively participated in that Mass through her concern for a member of the community. I'd like to add that my friend generally sings during Mass, responds aloud, exchanges the handshake of peace with everyone within reaching distance and, occasionally, brings up the gifts during the Offertory.

What accounts for all the emphasis today on "active participation" in the Mass?

As I see it, this emphasis stems from the belief that when the Mass is celebrated, something happens. The Mass is an action. Members of the community are joining in that action through their active participation.

The work of researchers who tell us that the early Christians viewed worship as the work of God's people lends support to this image of the Mass as an action.

Active participation in the Mass also grows from the conviction that God is present among the members of the community. God is not outside the community, doing something "to" the community. Instead God is with the community. Active participation by members of the community becomes a sign that God is alive within them.

It probably isn't surprising that active participation in the Mass is emphasized at a time when there is so much emphasis on the responsibility all Christians have for their church.

And it probably isn't surprising that many people believe active participation in the Mass has the beneficial, added effect of expanding a sense of involvement with others in the community.

Which takes me back to my friend, whose mind turned so intently to a teen-ager's needs during Sunday Mass recently.

Sunday Mass can be a real awakener for those who participate in it. God's presence is made known in many ways during the Mass: through the action at the altar, the preaching, the singing, the readings, the gifts. God's presence is made known through the people: priests, religious, parents, single adults, children, the aged.

People don't want their minds to wander away from the Mass. But with so many signs of God's presence around them, it is not difficult to understand why their minds sometimes wander into this celebration.

Which is what happened to my friend. Her attention was captured in a compelling way. My friend was puzzled and saddened by the teen-ager's illness. She was happy as she recalled a special insight the teen-ager had brought to a catechism class a few years back. She had a conviction that God was very much alive in this teen-ager.

I'd say my friend's sense of involvement with the community was high. And that Sunday it took form in a unique way.

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)



A Role to Play

Living stones: Building blocks of the church

By Father John Castélot
NC News Service

Living stones. That's what the early Christians were called in First Peter: "You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit," is the way the scripture writer puts it.

At first glance, those words might strike 20th century folks as odd. But to first century Christians, the words carried great significance.

Palestine was a uniformly rocky country. When people wanted to build a house, they could go into their back yards and pick up the stones they needed. A wet mud was used to cement the stones together as the house was erected.

For important communal buildings such as the temple, however, the people followed a somewhat different procedure. Since the temple was the house of God, they considered it worth all

possible care.

So, choosing huge blocks of stone, the people smoothed them out as best they could with the aid of their chisels and hammers. These large, fairly uniform stones then became the walls of their important buildings.

For the New Testament author, the idea of people as living stones goes back to Psalm 118. There we read of a stone rejected by the builder, which later becomes the cornerstone of the building. The early Christians saw this as a reference to Jesus Christ.

But they took the image a step further: With Jesus as cornerstone, they, the people, became the fine building blocks of the church. The early Christians were convinced that they themselves had become God's dwelling place, his temple.

So, what is the result of being a building block?

This age-old conviction is at the bottom of our active participation

in the liturgy, the public, official worship of God's people. The liturgy is not a spectator sport.

Everyone has a part to play, as the psalmist suggested in this description of a liturgical procession:

"The singers lead, the minstrels follow; in their midst the maidens play on timbrels. In your choirs bless God; bless the Lord, you of Israel's wellspring. There is Benjamin, the youngest, leading them, the princes of Judah as a body, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali" (Psalm 68:26-28).

In that description, everyone was involved: singers, minstrels, youngsters, members of the tribes, their leaders — everyone.

In the same spirit Luke sums up the life of the first Christians.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... They went

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