

# Bringing all your best to the altar

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

As he approaches the altar at the start of each Mass, Benedictine Father Donald Talafous assesses the mood of the congregation. "I hope to see an expectant, hopeful people bringing their best selves to the liturgy," he said in an interview.

But what he occasionally encounters is a congregation that gives the appearance of being "dragged out to Mass, driven by obligation." This sort of congregation hits him "like a stone wall, a weight you're fighting against," the theologian explained.

Father Talafous is a professor of theology at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., where he also served for 16 years as student chaplain.

As a priest, he said, the Mass is "the most important thing in my life." He explained that he tries "to bring an expectant vitality and generosity to Mass." He wants to make the Mass an experience that affects people positively. "It shouldn't be humdrum," he said. "Above all, it has to inspire people somehow."

"But I'm not the only one involved," the Benedictine quickly added. "What anyone gets out of Mass depends on what they bring

to it. People can't come just as sponges."

The usual complaint brought by students to Father Talafous is that they "get nothing out of Mass," he said. Often he responds by asking students what their expectations are and how they see their role in the Mass.

To help students change their attitude, he may suggest that they participate in a Mass in a different campus location. Participating in a Mass in a setting outside the church — for example, in a dormitory lounge with a small group — can be illuminating. It can help give students "a sense of Mass as a supper with the Lord and with each other," he said.

"The liturgy celebrates a moment when God is in our lives," the priest said. It reminds us that "God is met and served right in our ordinary lives and work." The fact that the Eucharist is a meal is a central symbol of that reality.

For Father Talafous, the gospel story of the wedding banquet is a key to how Christians should participate in the liturgy. "The king invites people to a banquet, not to a wake," he said. Each liturgy should "help to reinforce our conception of Christianity as a joyous fellowship of Christians."

In his homilies, Father Talafous points out possible ways of applying that Sunday's Gospel. But he remains aware that each person has the responsibility to choose a concrete way of responding to the message in the Gospel.

His aim, is to enable people to leave church with a better sense that the liturgy is "different from ordinary life but important for it."

The liturgy is a celebration of the fact "that we are one with God," Father Talafous said. "But that's false if we don't see it continued outside church."

Ideally, after Mass people should have "a sense that they have something to give to others," the Benedictine commented. "I like them to leave better able to present Christianity to the world through the quality and enthusiasm of their lives."

Today, too, many people "have trouble overcoming a bleak view of existence," the priest observed. He thinks Christian hope should be an antidote for this.

Instead of adding to people's misery, Christians are people who "can give a message of hope and trust" to others, he said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

# FOOD...

## ...for thought

In one parish recently, a fairly long procession made its way toward the altar at the time of the Offertory during Sunday Mass. One by one the adults and children in the procession deposited canned goods, bags of rice, cereal and other foods in large baskets at the front of the church, then returned to their seats.

Often it is suggested that if people hope to benefit as much as possible from the Mass, they need to bring something to it — something of themselves. The members of this parish had taken that suggestion literally. They brought gifts of food to share with the poor.

It was the parish's hope that a few hungry people might eat better that week, and that the meaning of the church's celebration of the Mass would extend beyond the hour spent inside the church on Sunday morning.

That parish's offertory procession helps to illustrate a point:

—During the Mass, something occurs "for" people. God's life is offered to them.

—But during the Mass something also is done "by" the people. They bring something of their own — something of themselves — to the Mass.

God addresses the people and they respond, in a variety of ways.

There is a sense in which every Mass is a point of beginning in the

lives of Christians. God's message is heard during the Mass. And, right then and there, Christians have an opportunity to respond, to live out the Christian message.

This helps to explain what the people "do" during Mass. They begin again to live out the Christian message. As participants in this celebration of God's life, they begin again to express the life of God within them.

When the U.S. bishops issued their 1983 national pastoral letter on war and peace, they urged Christians to try to live by Jesus' message about peace during every Mass. They encouraged Catholics to make the sign of peace at Mass a sign of reconciliation with God and with one another.

The bishops saw the exchange of peace, often in the form of a handshake, as more than a gesture of simple friendliness. They saw it as a way to express the Christian community's commitment to work for peace in homes and neighborhoods and in the world at large.

The exchange of peace is something the people "do" during Mass. But to the bishops it is not just "busyness." It is an opportunity to get involved again in the work of peace, reconciliation, healing, compassion.

What is done "by" you during Mass? What does your active involvement in the Mass signify? What do you "bring" to the Mass?

## ...for discussion

1. How do you participate in the Mass?

2. Often the Mass is described as a celebration. Why? What is celebrated? How is the idea of "celebration" expressed during Mass?

3. David Gibson speaks of a friend whose mind "wandered into the Mass" one Sunday. After reading his article, can you think of an occasion when something similar happened to you — when God seemed to be addressing you through another person in your parish community?

4. Father Lawrence Mick speaks of the responsibility each person has to make worship a life-giving experience for others. What does he mean?

### SECOND HELPINGS

"Experiencing Jesus: His Story," by Jesuit Father Mark Link. "The Bible is not a book about life; it is an invitation to life," writes Father Link in this introduction to the Bible and what can be learned from it about Jesus and ourselves. Father Link tells how Jesus is encountered through other people who help reveal to us "a Jesus we had never known before. He is the risen Jesus. He is a more exciting Jesus than we ever imagined in our wildest dream." Jesus is alive among his followers and can be encountered among them, Link suggests. Explaining some ways people might respond to God's invitation, it seems clear that this response will emerge from ordinary daily activity and its difficulties. The book includes discussion questions for small groups (Argus Communications, One DLM Park, Allen, Texas 1984 \$3.95)

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to the temple area together every day, while in their homes they broke bread" (Acts 2:42).

So the early Christians met together in their homes for "the breaking of the bread" and "meals in common." Obviously these were small groups with everyone taking part.

When people see a well-built house of worship for the first time, it is not uncommon for them to exclaim: "What a beautiful church." It is, however, a misplaced reaction, for the building is not the church. It is the place where the church meets for worship.

It is the people — all of us — who are the church. We are "living stones."

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)