



# 5 THINGS every Catholic should know about the MASS

Father Scott Detisch

**S**hortly into her one-woman show, the Search for signs of intelligent life in the universe, American comedienne Lily Tomlin steps out of character and offers the audience her litany of worries. She says:

*I think you should know that I worry a lot ...*

*I even worry about reflective flea collars. Oh, sure, drivers can see them glow in the dark, but so can the fleas.*

*I worry if peanut oil comes from peanuts and olive oil comes from olives, where does baby oil come from?*

*I worry that our lives are like soap operas. We can go for months and not tune in to them, then six months later we look in and the same stuff is still going on.*

*I worry if whoever thought up the term 'quality control' thought that if we didn't control it, it would get out of hand.*

In her humorous way, Lily Tomlin reminds us that we probably have our own litany of worries. We worry about everything from the state of the economy to the size of our weekly grocery bill. We worry about our family and friends, our jobs and careers, our health and physical fitness. We worry about the things from our past that still haunt us and the things in our future that intimidate us. Let's face it: There are times when we, like Lily, are people who worry a lot.

This is one of those times for me. As a parish priest and teacher, I watch what we Catholics do Sunday after Sunday. And day after day I hear from students their own dissatisfaction or even apathy about the Sunday Eucharist. Frankly, I am worried about what we Catholics really understand about the celebration of the Eucharist and what we are passing on to future generations:

- I worry that the dominant motivation for coming to Sunday Eucharist is to fulfil an obligation to a church law and not to

experience the opportunity to offer praise and thanks to God.

- I worry that people think that Christ is not present in the liturgy until the consecration of the bread and wine and so everything up to that point is merely prelude and not important.
- I worry that people still regard the Mass as the priest's responsibility in which they only play a minor role.
- I worry that, while we sing, recite, read, listen, process, stand, kneel, sit, shake hands, and go to communion, we do not really have an encounter with Christ which transforms us.
- I worry that parishes, while adhering to all the rubrics of the ritual, are not celebrating the liturgy with zeal and gusto.
- I worry that far too many seats in our churches are empty on Sunday.
- I worry that we are not concerned enough about those empty seats.

Some readers may think I worry too much, and perhaps they are right. Other readers may be disappointed not to find their own worries in my litany, for theirs certainly need to be considered also.

The point of offering you my "litany of eucharistic worries," however, is to share with you some principles about the Eucharist that may begin to address these worries. It is my hope and my firm conviction that the more we Catholics truly understand the nature of the eucharistic celebration, the more vibrant our worship of God will be and the more we will be transformed by what we celebrate and by the One we worship.

To that end, there are five things every Catholic should know about the Eucharist.

## **1 Eucharist does not begin with Christ's absence and then suddenly move to Christ's presence.**

When the faithful gather for liturgy they are the true Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). Christ himself pointed out that when two or three gather in his name he is there among them (Matt. 18:20). This means that the very act of gathering in faith to celebrate the Eucharist is already an experience of the tangible presence of Christ.

Far too many Catholics, however, mistakenly believe that Christ only becomes present at the moment of consecration. Therefore, nothing in the liturgy up to that point seems as important. This leads to some disturbing habits within the congregation: impatience or even annoyance with efforts to get people to greet each other or to sing well together; perfunctory recitation of the readings rather than engaging proclamation; hesitancy about standing during the Eucharistic Prayer, which would match the posture for the other moments of prayer during the liturgy; and complacency about arriving late for the celebration.

A first step toward vibrant worship is to bring all the faithful to an appreciation of what Pope Paul VI taught the church more than 30 years ago. In his 1965 encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (On the Eucharist), Pope Paul states that the assembled people at prayer, the presider, scripture readings, and bread and wine are all modes of Christ's presence. He calls all of these the "real presence of Christ." He says, however, that the consecrated bread and wine are the Real Presence "*par excellence*," meaning the fullest expression of Christ's Presence.

We receive the Real Presence of Christ as consecrated bread and wine because they are a part of a wider context of Christ's Real Presence in the eucharistic meal that begins with our act of gathering. Thus, the whole liturgy is important.

## **2 The Catholic Church believes that the Eucharist is the "true, real, and substantial" presence of Christ.**

As much as all the other elements bring us to Christ, there is something unique about Christ's presence in the form of the eucharistic bread and wine. In its Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, The Council of Trent in the 16th century was intent on refuting any notion that the consecrated bread and wine merely evoke our recollections about Christ's presence but are not actually Christ's presence. The council insisted that Christ, under the species of bread and wine, is "*truly, really, and substantially*" present.

***What the church is really asking us when it calls for our full, conscious, and active participation is our real presence.***

There is no pretence about our encounter with Christ in the Eucharist – Christ is actually there for us. Moreover, everything about Christ is there – his full divine nature and full humanness; his suffering, death, and Resurrection; his Spirit that is sent to us; his love and forgiveness poured out for us; his healing power offered to us. All of this is the true and Real Presence of Christ.

## **3 Eucharist requires the "full, conscious, and active participation" of all the faithful.**

The Second Vatican Council issued 16 documents. Significantly, the first document was *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy). Central to the church's plan for renewal is its insistence that all the faithful fully, consciously, and actively participate in the liturgy.

But how does this happen? It begins with priests but also includes all the faithful. Earlier in the constitution, the bishops write:

*"Pastors of souls must... realise that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it."*

What the church is really asking of us when it calls for our full, conscious, and active participation is our real presence, not our mere attendance at Sunday Eucharist because of some obligation to church law. Our real presence is not routine recitation of prayers, minimal attempts to sing, half-hearted listening to scripture and homily, or anxiousness for the ritual to be over within 45 minutes or less. These are more indicative of our real absence during the liturgy.

To be greatly transformed by the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we must offer to Christ our hearts and minds, our bodies and voices at prayer, the sacrifices we have made, the hopes and dreams we cling to, the disappointments and failures that cling to us. Our real presence is to be joined with the assembled believers in courageously expressing to God our praise and thanks for all that God has brought to our lives as well as our need for God's love to continue to transform our lives.

A parish community that fully, consciously, and actively participates in the eucharistic liturgy is a community that attracts others – many others. Such a community is often without empty seats. It is a community that understands ministry because it knows about the meal. It is a community that promotes the gospel because it prays from the gut. It is a community that loves to serve God's people because it longs to sing God's praises.

## 4 The Eucharist is a meal of sacrifice.

The Eucharist makes present to us Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross. It is Christ's broken body that we eat and his poured out blood that we drink. Hence, in many ways, the Eucharist is a death meal. We are drawn into the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and so we are brought to the moment of Christ's death.

What this means is that by our receiving of Christ's Body and Blood, we are willing to share in his self-sacrifice. We are willing to die with Christ. It is not a mere physical death that we agree to, however. We agree to die to our sinfulness and selfishness when we celebrate the Eucharist. We agree to sacrifice ambitions and priorities that are out of sync with the message and ministry of Christ. We agree to let die any imbalanced concern for our own needs so that we might generously respond to the needs of others.

It is in understanding that the Eucharist is really a meal of sacrifice and death that individuals and communities can be transformed by the Eucharist. Every transformation is the death of something about us; every change in our lives requires a willingness to sacrifice something we have been holding on to. This is not easy, which is why we need the Eucharist. We receive from Christ, whose own sacrificial death is made present to us in the eucharist, the strength to die to ourselves.

## 5 The Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives.

But while the Eucharist is strength for our dying, it is also the centre of our living. This final concept also comes from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. It reminds us that, because we are disciples, Christ ought to be the beginning and end of all aspects of our lives. Just as each day should ideally begin and end with prayer, so too every endeavour and every relationship in our lives should be rooted in our bond with Christ and directed toward what Christ asks of us.

In this process, the Eucharist is essential, for in our celebration on Sunday we discover more deeply what we are called to do Monday to Saturday as followers of Christ. It is where we receive Christ's presence and thereby receive Christ's strength and vitality to do what we are called to do. The Eucharist is where we hear Christ's Word and thereby find the real focus and motivation for all that we do. This is how the Eucharist is truly the source of our lives.

Moreover, to the Sunday celebration we are to bring everything that happened in our lives the previous Monday to Saturday. We bring our accomplishments and failures. We bring every person we encountered and every task we performed. We bring the love, affection, and joy as well as the anger, hurt, and sadness. We bring it, and we give it over to Christ. This is the significance of our bringing the bread and wine to the altar.

That bread to be broken is our broken selves. That wine to be poured out is all the love, energy, time, forgiveness, and compassion that poured out from us during the past week for the sake of others. As the bread and wine we offer are transformed into Christ's Body and Blood so too are the lives we bring to the altar transformed in Christ. Thus, the Eucharist is the summit – the ultimate goal – of our lives.

When people really begin to appreciate in their hearts how the Eucharist is the source and summit of their lives, they will desire more earnestly to participate in it. They will sense their deep need to celebrate it. It is from this posture of desire and need that all the people, including priests, will lend themselves more willingly to a vibrant, meaningful, and transforming celebration of the Eucharist.

Are you worried that all of this sounds like too lofty a goal? Does a more vibrant and transforming celebration of the

***In our celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday we discover more deeply what we are called to do Monday through Saturday. We find a real focus for all we do.***

Eucharist seem unreachable when liturgy committees and priests have too many more basic worries about the eucharistic celebration to contend with?

- They worry about lectors who sometimes forget which cycle of the lectionary we are in and read the wrong readings.
- They worry about altar servers who have been known to burn holes in the carpet with incense charcoal.
- They worry about the traditional Catholics who think there have been too many changes and the progressive Catholics who think there have been too few.
- They worry about the number of people who come late, the number of people who leave early, and the number of people still not singing in the pews.
- They worry that, despite all their creative ideas and efforts, what would really please the people is a "quick Mass" with no music, homily, silent pauses, or any "liturgical extras."

These five principles all Catholics should know about the Eucharist are a good starting point for bringing about effective liturgical renewal in a parish. At some point, however, we have to stop worrying and start believing that meaningful efforts to teach about the Eucharist can help change people's liturgical habits. We ought to trust that any efforts to deepen people's understanding of the nature of the Eucharist will lead to a greater celebration of it. It's time to move from anxious worry to vibrant worship.



## THE MASS IS A GENIUS...

**A**nd I'll tell you why. Because each and every Mass celebrated over the course of many centuries in many lands under every conceivable condition in every conceivable surrounding and language has gathered a random aggregate of people together for a miracle meal in the name of the Christ, and the whole point of Christ and the church that grew up in his name is to gather random aggregates of people in communion with the divine.

So the Mass is a constant and consistent microcosm of meaning.

Because while the Mass is a repetitive ritual, each one is different from every other one, in tone, volume, length, character, flavor, light and population, not unlike the way human beings, while all human, are utterly different each from each.

So the Mass is just like the creatures who come to it for sustenance and succor.

Because the miracle at the very heart of the Mass, the mysterious conversion of bread into the veritable Body of Christ, is wholly inexplicable, and, let's be completely honest here, unbelievable. Just like the miracle at the very heart of Catholicism itself, which is summed up tersely by the enormous phrase Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. But we do believe these things, against all sense and evidence, against the great weight of the opinion of the world.

So the Mass contains within it a miracle exactly as mysterious and confusing and confounding as the more momentous miracle that causes the Mass itself to occur, day after day after day.

The Mass has a central figure around whom the action revolves, the celebrant, but is designed and performed for all present, the congregation. Or, in other words the play is performed by a troupe, among whom one is the prime actor with the best lines, but the hero of the play

arrives in the middle of the performance, after which he is present but unseen, and what the troupe performs or reenacts or remembers or celebrates is, in part the hero's demise and startling return, which is echoed in the Eucharist, when what was dross is suddenly divine.

Because the Mass is endlessly capable of reinvention and recalibration, has proven itself wonderfully amenable to taking what is given (the local political scene, the language, the physical circumstances of room, wet hedgerow, icy foxhole, steaming hold of fetid ship) and making of them moments of immense power and grace.

Because the Mass, like all geniuses, may just as easily break down and be reduced without warning to a shell of itself, an echo of what it was or might have been, an amazement gone awry, a delight dulled.

In short the Mass is a genius because like genius it is a mystery that we find enticing and necessary; because it cuts jagged bright holes in the unknown and shoves us closer to what we might call wisdom, or God; because it appears to be a wholly normal and orthodox vehicle in which is found, inexplicably, the stunning.

What is the Mass? It is the shuffling of everyman to a meal and familiar table talk, but somehow there at the picnic table, the dining-room table, the rickety card table where the children sit there is, as the basket of bread is passed from hand to hand, a flicker of light a brief zest. In the air like the spoor of lightning, a voice singing powerfully in the distance, a few blocks away, past the neighbors' neighbors' houses, and you strain to hear it and it's the most extraordinary snatch of song you ever heard and the Mass is over, go in peace, and you do.

---

By BRIAN DOYLE, editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland and author of *Credo* (St. Mary's Press, 1999), a collection of essays about faith.