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Redeemably Awful: The Paschal Mystery

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What exactly are we celebrating when we go to Mass? Over the last few decades it has become fashionable to give themes to our Sunday liturgies. Sometimes observances like Catholic Schools Week seem to almost become the main focus of our liturgy. While certain of these observances last for a week or longer, others, like World Missions Sunday, take place on a single Sunday.

If we are not careful these non-liturgical observances can take over the Sunday liturgy. Some parishes go overboard when the whole altar space is crowded with giant *Trócaire* boxes and displays about relieving poverty in less-fortunate countries. This is not to mention the custom of filling the altar with children's artwork for weeks around the First Communion date or even pumpkins or some other seasonal bric-a-brac to mark an autumn fair or Earth Day or some other observance. If a celebration does not feature in the General Roman Calendar (as inculturated by the episcopal conference) or to a lesser extent in the Roman Martyrology, then it shouldn't receive anything more than a cursory mention in the liturgy such as a simple announcement or mention in the General Intercessions.

Perhaps these intrusions into the liturgy become most problematic when they deal with money. We have all seen examples of the November devotion to the Holy Souls getting out of hand with money envelopes with the names of the deceased being placed on the altar or before the tabernacle. It goes without saying that the problem is not praying for the dead, but any hint of commercialization or simony must be avoided at all costs. The Church has always needed money and charity is part of the essence of Christianity. The problem is when this becomes central to the liturgy. In the second century St. Justin gives us the oldest description of a celebration of Mass, where he explains how at the end of the celebration "those who are well-to-do and willing give as they choose, as each one so desires. The collection is then deposited with the presider who uses it on behalf of orphans,

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widows, those who are needy due to sickness or any other cause, prisoners, strangers who are traveling; in short, he assists all who are in need" (*Apology* 1.65). Here the collection takes place after everything else has happened. Christian charity is understood to be a *fruit* of the celebration, and not a constitutive element of the celebration itself.

Some people used to consider the Offertory (and the offertory collection) as being one of the highpoints of the Mass. They think that by contributing financially we are participating in the sacrifice. Yes, it is true that offering or sacrifice is an integral part of the Eucharist. However, in the liturgy there are different types of offering. It was not by mistake that the word Offertory has been removed from the third edition of the Roman Missal to describe what is now properly called "the preparation of the gifts." However, the *principal* offertory is that of Christ who gave himself for us, unworthy as we are, on the Cross. This same offering is now manifested as the Resurrected Christ intercedes before his Father in heaven on behalf of humankind. The *second* offertory is that which belongs to us, giving ourselves totally to God the Father by joining our whole being to Christ's primordial self-giving (in response to his grace). The Christian is called to a total gift of self to God and neighbour. The Bread and Wine come as a distant *third* in the order of importance. *Then* the necessary evil of "unrighteous mammon" for the support of the poor or the Church is just about included in the "also ran" category of offering.

So, to answer the question what the Church is meant to celebrate we turn to a relatively new theological concept. The Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery of Christ when she gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. This is the primordial reason for Christian celebration and is the theme of every liturgy. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* outlines for us how central this concept is at the start of the section on liturgy:

"In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present. During his earthly life Jesus announced his Paschal mystery by his teaching and anticipated it by his actions. When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father "once for all." His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is – all that he did and suffered for all men and women – participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times

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while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life. (CCC 1085)”

Both Cross and Resurrection have to be at the core of each and every liturgical celebration. In the search for “relevance” and our tendency to give in to the all too easy desire to be trendy and popular, we can easily forget what the real theme of the liturgy is – *Jesus Christ*. If Christ is not the central message, then something is gravely wrong. For this reason, the liturgical year and the feastdays of the saints ought always to bring us to a deeper meeting with Christ. The paschal mystery is like a cut diamond whose facets flash in the sunlight, the legitimate feasts are like these facets that turn the diamond in the rough into a beautiful cut stone that sparkles in the divine Taboric Light revealing the true beauty of Christ.

What I am saying might ruffle a few feathers or make some uncomfortable. However, I would suggest that in the long term we are shooting ourselves in the foot by overemphasizing non-liturgical observances that are alien to Christian liturgy. It is fine to emphasize certain social questions and call attention to worthy causes in other contexts. The Vatican even dedicates full years to deepen our appreciation of the priesthood or some other aspect of the Faith. However, these observances ought to take place somewhere *other* than during the Sunday Eucharistic assembly.

I would suggest that the above reflections reveal an often-undiagnosed crisis facing the Church today. Our problem is not the many people who consider themselves “Catholic” but rarely come to church. I propose that a much greater problem is that many of those who do attend Mass on a regular basis have an extremely limited contact with the parish and their faith often consists of only going to Mass. These have little or no institutional interaction with the parish other than a half an hour on a Sunday morning, and if we don’t catch them there, there is very little chance that they will attend another parish activity. Additionally, for many of the regular Mass-goers, their attendance is no longer weekly, particularly among the younger generations, many consider coming to Mass once or twice a month to be more than enough. The true problem is not a lack of interest or that modern people are too busy to give more time to the parish. To be a disciple of Christ entails taking up our personal cross each day and following Christ to Calvary, so that we can share the triumph of his Resurrection. Simply put, today we are facing a *crisis of faith*.

The solution is not to cram everything into the Sunday Mass. In the short term, this might work as the best way to draw people’s attention to some cause or other, or even to gather a few Euro in

a collection, but will the children of those who today are hanging on by a thread continue to attend the Eucharist? Only a true evangelization of adults can help an adult faith to mature in them. The liturgy is not the full solution, but it is part of it. Any fruitful evangelization in the Catholic Church must be accompanied by a living liturgy. If the paschal mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ is not *front* and *central* to the liturgical experience in a parish, it is impossible to find Christ's promised fullness of life in the liturgy.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is not cowardly, on the contrary it requires that you dare to face up to the evil that the other person has done to you. That's why forgiveness can hurt, but forgiveness is above all liberating. Not only for those who are forgiven but especially for the victim who can forgive. Forgiveness means that you can finally let go of anger, resentment and other negative feelings. Without forgiveness, these feelings threaten to grow deeper and take up more and more space. This is why forgiveness fosters inner healing, makes new life possible and gives hope. Forgiveness means that you can really turn the page on any evil in your life.

– NIKOLAS SINTOBIN, SJ, *Did Jesus Really Exist?* 2020. (Dublin: Messenger Publications). p. 76.