

Why Attend Sunday Mass?

The Spectacle Which Thrills the Christian World

By John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

“THERE is too large an element of compulsion in the Catholic religion. Its members are constrained by multitudinous laws to do this, forbidden to do that. They seldom enjoy any option in the matter. Take their attendance at Mass on Sunday. They are obliged under pain of mortal sin to attend. Why not recognize that children at last grow up? Why not respect the intellectual maturity of the individual and allow him to decide for himself whether he wishes to attend Mass instead of forcing him by a positive command? Why not make it a matter of option instead of obligation?”

Such a view is frequently expressed by our non-Catholic fellow citizens. While admiring many features of the Church's teachings, many profess to be deterred from entering the fold because they fear their liberty would be too greatly restricted. They wish to engage in religious exercises only when the spirit moves them, only when they feel like doing so. With them the attendance at religious worship is a matter of mood and caprice, not one of principle or law binding them independently of mood or whim.

The practice of making one's religious life hinge upon mood or rest upon the stable foundation of principle and law represents a point of fundamental divergence between the Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. For the sake of clarity and brevity, we will focus our attention upon the matter of attendance at divine services, though what is said here will be seen to apply all along the line. Let us ask our dear non-Catholic friend to look into the matter with an open mind, and see for himself if the policy of the Church in this regard does not reflect the voice of reason and the voice of God. Let us see whether the teaching of the Church mirrors a spirit of excessive paternalism cramping the freedom of the individual or whether it is a mighty bulwark against the anarchy of riotous individualism and an antidote necessary to safe-guard the stability of the religious life from the menace of mood and whim.

A Universal Duty

General obligations need to be particularized and rendered specific if they are to secure universal or widespread observance. The obligation to worship God is universal: it binds all mankind—red, white, black, yellow and brown. Its observance has not been left to the caprice or whim of man; for amid thunder and lightning, Jehovah gave to Moses on Mount Sinai the tablet on which was inscribed the command: “Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day.” Thus did Almighty God particularize a general obligation.

The mandate to worship God was carved not only on tablets of stone but upon the fleshy tablets of the human heart. The tendency to worship springs spontaneously from one of the deepest instincts of our nature; that tribe is yet to be discovered which offers not prayer or sacrifice to the great Supreme Ruler of the universe. Anthropologists and historians investigating the life and customs of ancient races, in all the stages varying from barbarism to civilization, have been struck by the universality of the practice of rendering homage to the deity. Pope was thus able to write with scientific accuracy:

“Father of all; in every age, In every clime adored,

By saint, by savage, and by sage, Jehovah, Jove, or Lord.”

Though the methods of worship and of sacrifice differ in a thousand ways, though the deity is called by various names and worshipped under myriad forms, running through all of them is the same fundamental human cry: the cry of the creature to his Creator, the voice acknowledging the absolute dependence of the subject upon his Lord and God. It is this acknowledgement of the creature's complete dependence upon the Creator that constitutes the very heart and soul of all religious worship. Our coming to church, our kneeling down, our prayers, especially our assistance at Mass, are so many ways in which we profess our dependence upon God and acknowledge His sovereign dominion over us.

By What Title?

The worship of God does not rest, however, upon mere custom, no matter how universal or hoary that may be: it is founded upon the very law of nature. By creating us out of nothing, almighty God possesses

sovereign dominion over us by the strongest of all titles, namely, creation. By taking a worthless block of crude, unshapely marble and carving out of it a great statue, “a thing of beauty and a joy forever,” a sculptor acquires title to the statue. Why? Because by his toil and genius he gives to it whatever value it possesses. So by the even stronger title of absolute creation has the Creator complete dominion over all His creatures, the work of His hands. The relationship existing between the creature and the Creator as rooted in the law of nature is, therefore, one of most complete dependence on the part of the creature upon his Creator, both for his creation and for his conservation in existence. Every human being owes the duty of acknowledging this dependence by acts of worship and adoration. Consequently the duty to worship springs from the law of nature, binds all human beings who have reached the age of reason and has been given explicit formulation in the divine positive law revealed by Almighty God to Moses.

Can not such a duty be fulfilled, however, by giving to God merely interior worship, that is, by adoring Him in our minds only, without any external manifestations of our worship? Thus one might say: “I will stay at home on Sunday morning and worship God in my own mind, without kneeling down or folding my hands or uttering words of prayer, and thus satisfy the natural precept of worshipping.” The person who would do only this would fail to give God the complete worship to which He has a right; for God is the Creator of our bodies not less than of our minds and souls. Therefore both the mind and the body should participate in rendering to the Almighty a complete act of worship.

As a matter of fact this dictate of our reason is further confirmed by an interesting side-light which modern psychology offers. Psychology tells us that the person who never gives external expression to his internal sentiments and feelings will cause them to be choked, stunted and gradually atrophied, while on the other hand, suitable external expression strengthens and intensifies them. Thus the devotions of the Church in which the faithful kneel before the altar in suppliant posture, fold the hands, strike the breast, and utter ardent words of prayer, far from lessening fervor, greatly strengthen and vivify it.

So much, then, for the existence of a general obligation on the part of all mankind to worship God. Now let us examine the specific manner in which that obligation is to be discharged, as revealed to us not by unaided human reason but by the light from on high.

Light From On High

In the old law, the strict observance of the Sabbath was prescribed under the severest penalties, even the penalty of death itself. “Observe the day of the Sabbath, to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee.” (Deut. 5:12) In thundering tones the prophets condemned violations of the Sabbath, saying: “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not our fathers do these things and our God brought all this evil upon us and upon this city? And you bring more wrath upon Israel by violating the Sabbath.” (2 Esd. 13:17,18) The Book of Machabees records that the arrogant monarch Antiochus who defiled the temple and desecrated its altars, and violated “the Sabbaths” and “the solemn days of the fathers,” was punished with a loathsome malady that terminated in death.

When Christ came upon earth He did not nullify this law, but by His own example He confirmed it. He did strip it, however, of some of the accretions of the Pharisees, who considered works of charity and of mercy as unlawful on that day. It was on the Sabbath that Christ cured the sick at the pool of Bethesda, healed the cripple with the withered hand in the synagogue, and restored health to the man sick with the dropsy. To the Pharisees who appeared scandalized that the Master should work a good deed on the sabbath, He said: “For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.” “What man shall there be among you, that hath a sheep: and if the same shall fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not take hold on it and lift it up? How much better is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do a good deed on the Sabbath day.” (Matt. 12:11, 12)

Why Sunday?

Under the Old Law, the Sabbath or seventh day of the week was observed because on that day God rested from his labors of creation, and on that day He delivered the Jewish people from the galling yoke of their Egyptian bondage. The observance of the Sabbath served, therefore, as a traditional reminder of their miraculous deliverance in accordance with the words of the Almighty: “Remember that thou also didst

serve in Egypt and the Lord thy God brought thee out from thence with a strong hand and stretched out arm. Therefore hath He commanded thee that thou shouldst observe the Sabbath day.” (Deut. 5:15)

The Old Law was but an image or foreshadowing of the Light and Truth that was to come. When that Light came in the personality of Jesus, the old Mosaic law having fulfilled its function of preparing the Jews for the coming of the Messiah, was abrogated in favor of the new dispensation or law of Christ.

To signalize this transition from the old to the new law, the Apostles transferred the observance to the Sunday, the first day of the week. Sunday was chosen because on that day was wrought the greatest miracle of the Christian religion, the resurrection of Christ from the dead. It was on Sunday also that the Holy Ghost descended upon the Apostles and sent them out to preach the Gospel to the world. Sunday is therefore, the birthday of the Christian Church.

How are we to observe the Sunday? The Church by the authority divinely committed to her, has given explicit formulation of the obligation contained in the third commandment by telling us in her first precept: “Thou shalt hear Mass on Sunday and holydays of obligation and thou shalt abstain from servile work.” The positive part of this precept binds all the faithful who have attained the use of reason to hear Mass on Sunday and holydays under pain of mortal sin. Grave causes such as sickness, lack of a church in the town, or other circumstances which render it very difficult to attend Mass, will excuse a person from guilt in this matter. A person with a good conscience will not magnify little inconveniences into insurmountable obstacles. He will scorn such flimsy excuses as the weather being too hot or too cold, rain or snow, as unworthy of a true follower of Jesus Christ. Realizing that the secrets of the heart are as an open book to almighty God Who knows whether or not the individual can attend if he really wants to, he does not engage in the chicanery of trying to throw dust in the eyes of an omniscient deity by manufacturing weak and flimsy excuses.

Vitality Of Religion

The history of the past nineteen hundred years demonstrates the wisdom of the Church’s action in rendering this divine command definite and specific and in attaching to it a proper moral sanction. By that I mean, making it bind in conscience under penalty of grievous sin. For not only in our country but throughout Christendom it is Catholics who give to the world a demonstration of the vitality of religion and of unfaltering belief in a God worthy of our reverence and worship, by thronging to Mass at every Catholic Church in the world.

Some years ago a Chicago newspaper undertook to find out how many people were attending Church on Sunday. Stationing reporters at every church and synagogue in that great city, they counted every person who entered. The results were little short of startling. They discovered that 85 per cent of all the people attending divine services passed through the portals of the Catholic Church. So it is largely throughout our country and throughout Christendom.

Take the campus of the University of Illinois. With students in attendance from most of the cities and towns in the State and from throughout the nation, it represents a fair cross section of our population. Non-Catholic friends who have attended most of the other churches on the campus have estimated that the student attendance at all the churches averages about two thousand. Though we number but about ten per cent of the student enrollment at the University, we have in attendance each Sunday about as many as all the other churches and synagogues on the campus put together. I mention this not in a spirit of boasting, but as an evidence of the wisdom of the Church in lifting this matter out of the domain of unstable whims and moods and rendering it one of stern obligation — of obedience to a divine command. It is an evidence too of the inexhaustible vigor and vitality of the Catholic religion which has always made the worship, the love, and the service of God its primary objective.

What Is The Matter?

In a letter published in The Daily Illini, in the autumn of 1933, a student told of visiting two of the so-called “liberal churches” on the campus on Homecoming Sunday.

“I had expected,” she said, “to find a large attendance at such churches in a University community. What I actually found was a picture of desolation — an attendance of 3 at one and 49 at the other. What is

the matter with students at this University?" was the plaintive query with which she closed.

Without uncharitableness the question might better have been: "What is the matter with such churches?"

The answer is: They have abdicated their most important and distinctive function — the worshipping of God, and the instilling of love and deathless devotion to Him in the hearts of their people. Instead of temples for the worship of God they have become lecture halls for the discussion of problems in sociology, economics, ethics, philosophy, science and politics. The name of God is spoken but rarely and then half apologetically as a curtsy reluctantly given out of deference to ancient religious usage and thought which is now largely passe.

At other times the name of God is used in a vague, nebulous manner, as a synonym for Nature or the Cosmos, from which every connotation of personality has been rigorously torn. The stern condemnation uttered by Christ against those who misused the temple in His day might well be paraphrased today: "My house is a house of prayer. But you have made it a lecture hall for the discussion of everything under the sun but religion."

The simple truth is: People may discuss science and art. They may be interested in the coloring of a rose. They may admire a sunset or a waterfall. But they can love only a person and worship only a God. There can be no substitute for a personal God, a Heavenly Father, from Whom we come and to Whose all embracing arms we shall ultimately return. The golden calf of wealth, the flesh pots of sensual indulgence, the fetish of science, intrigue for a day but they leave unsatisfied the deepest cravings of the human heart for union with its God and Maker. "Our hearts have been made for Thee, O God, and they shall never rest until they rest in Thee!" This cry of Augustine, sounded after running through the whole diapason of the varied sensuality of ancient Rome, re-echoes the anguish of humanity today, surfeited with jazz and pleasures which excite but never satisfy.

Francis Thompson portrays the relationship between God and man which holds today, and which will hold till the crack of doom, when he depicts the Almighty warning wayward man: "All things betray thee who betrayest me." There is something in the structure and in the heart of the universe which responds to goodness, truth, beauty and love, with divine compensations but which dooms their opposites to decadence and death.

What The Mass is

The Mass is the central act of devotion in the Catholic religion. It is the unbloody renewal of the sacrifice of Calvary. When the priest bends low over the bread and wine, and pronounces those tremendous words, the most momentous ever framed by human lips, "This is my body. This is my blood," the heaven of heavens opens, and the King and Ruler of the universe, Jesus Christ, comes down upon our altar, to be lifted up as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. If we could but tear away the veil which hides from our eyes the vision of our Lord and Savior, how we would kneel breathless and transfixed in the rapture of a great devotion. It is a moment when the world falls away and we unworthy sinners kneel in the presence of the divine. "I could attend Masses forever," said Cardinal Newman, "and not be tired." That brief hour at Mass should be the happiest and the holiest of all our week.

The attendance at Mass is the mark of a practical Catholic. One who fails to attend is not worthy of the name. While all mortal sins involve great malice, there is attached to this sin a peculiar and unique malice. Other sins like anger or lust are usually the result of a great passion which clouds the reason and shakes the will. But missing Mass is done in cold blood — calmly, deliberately, wilfully.

The sinner says in effect: "Though You suffered excruciating pain on Calvary's Cross and died thereon for me, yet I will not give you one hour out of the 168 hours you give me every week." It is the action of an ingrate. God punishes it accordingly. It is one of the surest ways of losing one's religion and dying in mortal sin. As the tree inclines, so shall it fall. As it falls, so shall it lie. As a man lives so shall he die. As he dies, so shall he spend eternity.

Why People Miss Mass

Why do people miss Mass? Failure to understand the meaning of Mass, carelessness, laziness,

worldliness, and a lack of moral backbone when in non-Catholic surroundings. These are some of the causes. But the chief cause is a sinful life. Habits of sin, secret or public, cry out against attendance at a religious service which scourges them with ceaseless reproach. Why attend Mass when every moment rebukes me for my secret vice? is a question that inevitably arises. This fact is illustrated by the following incident:

A student had ceased to attend Mass and had abandoned the practice of his religion.

"It's all buncombe," he said to some of his fellow students who tried to remonstrate with him.

"Priests are in for what they can get out of it," he said. "It's just a racket, and I want none of it. I don't believe in it any longer."

Some months later he was about to be arrested on a paternity charge. Seizing an auto he sought to escape. Rounding a corner at full speed, the auto turned over and pinned him, badly mangled, underneath. "God," he cried to the state policeman who had just caught up with him.

"Get me a priest. I'm dying. I want a priest badly."

With eternity closing in upon him, he threw aside his mask of make-believe and faced the terrible reality.

Blood was flowing from gaping wounds in his neck and forehead. The policeman sped for the nearest Catholic Church several miles away. When he returned with a priest, consciousness had almost left the dying man. Glassy eyes, distorted with the wild look of horror that came into his face as he realized he was dying in mortal sin, was all that greeted the priest bending low over him, seeking to hear his confession. "God! God!" he was murmuring half unconsciously, "It's too late — to late." A few convulsive twitching of the lips and he was dead.

In the inside pocket of his coat they found a newspaper clipping. It told of a priest who had gone wrong. What a flood of light that frayed clipping threw upon the mental processes he had gone through in those last five months. It requires no expert in psychology to see therein the sop he was trying to throw to his disturbed conscience. Stabbed with the consciousness of a double life, a habit of flagrant sin, he sought to rationalize his conduct. That is, he tried to find reasons to justify it. Unwilling to make conduct conform to the moral code of his religious faith, he sought to destroy the 'latter, saying, "It's all buncombe. It's all a racket."

He reached out for the clipping concerning a single priest as a drowning man grasps for a straw. Because Judas betrayed Christ, because Peter denied Him, because Thomas doubted, religion is all buncombe! Such are the straws for which people with guilty consciences have grasped throughout the ages in the futile effort to stay the waves of remorse flooding their soul and drowning them in a sea of anguish and torture.

A Mechanism Of Escape

This mental quirk is called by the psychologist the tendency to rationalize conduct. It had better be called the tendency to irrationalize conduct, for that is what it is. Nature rebels against a dichotomy, a splitting of itself into two warring camps. When a man believes one thing and does the opposite, nature seeks to effect a unity. The logical procedure is to make his conduct conform to his approved moral code. Failing to do this, nature seeks to stop the gnawing of remorse by making belief conform to practice. This subtle treachery of the mind is a mechanism of escape, a symptom of a mind awry. It is a flight from a disagreeable situation into a world of unreality where folly masquerades in the garb of make-believe, and hides under a veneer of artifice.

"Woman," says G. K. Chesterton half in humor, "uses her intelligence to find reasons to support her intuitions." The sinner, unwilling to reform, uses his intelligence to find reason to justify his mode of life. The name for this tendency of the mind to rationalize bad conduct is new, but the knowledge of it is old. Shakespeare gives a capital illustration. In the castle at Inverness, Macbeth has just murdered Duncan, the king. His hands are bloody, his face pale with fear, as he meets Lady Macbeth and reports hearing two servants of the king wake in their sleep and speak. The following dialogue occurs.

Macbeth:

One cried, God bless us! and Amen, the other;

As they had seen me. with these hang-man's hands.

Listening their fear, I could not say Amen,

When they did say, God bless us.

Lady Macbeth:

Consider it not see deeply.

Macbeth:

But wherefore could I not pronounce, Amen?

I had most need of blessing, and Amen Stuck in my throat.

Lady Macbeth:

These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so it will make us mad.

When Shakespeare depicts Lady Macbeth uttering those words, he gives recognition to a universal tendency of the human mind to shrink from the frank acknowledgment of an evil deed, and to endeavor to escape by dressing it up in the garb of virtue. Murder must yield to a sweeter name which breathes the fragrance of innocence. It is a habit as old as Adam, who sought to hide his guilt behind his help-mate, Eve.

Attend Entire Mass

The remedy for the habit of missing Mass, for negligence in the practice of one's religion, for alleged lack of faith, is seldom argument. In most cases the remedy is to tear down the skeleton dangling in the family closet, to confess the secret vice, to begin to obey the moral law, to turn to Christ in penitence and prayer. A good conscience and a pure heart are more helpful than clear eyes in seeing God and in sensing the invisible realities of the spiritual world. Face toward the light and the shadows flee behind you.

The precept of hearing Mass obliges one to be present at the very inception of the holy sacrifice. People who display diligence and ingenuity in getting to their other appointments on time and to their trains ten and fifteen minutes in advance will, strangely enough, tramp into the august sacrifice with shocking tardiness. Such tardiness not only distracts and disedifies the entire congregation, but it manifests a lack of reverence for the great supreme Master, Who is both the High Priest and Victim of the sublime sacrifice that is being offered at the altar. Accidents, of course, are always liable to happen. Anyone may at some time be late through unavoidable circumstances. For such there is no blame. But there is something singularly lacking in reverence for the Holy sacrifice in the action of the person who is frequently or almost habitually late. If one but observes, he will note that as a rule, it is the same individuals who Sunday after Sunday come tramping into Mass with such disedifying tardiness. The only safe rule for a person to follow is to aim to be present in the church from five to ten minutes before Mass time.

Example Of Columbus

The true Catholic will not be deterred by slight inconveniences from attending Mass. He will exhaust every ingenuity to find a way. Christopher Columbus has given an inspiring example of respect for trying circumstances. It illustrates the spirit of unfaltering trust in God which guided him in his voyage across the uncharted waters of unknown seas in quest of a new world. Intensely anxious though he was to reach his journey's end, with a crew mutinying because of the continued failure to sight land, the intrepid explorer nevertheless insisted on anchoring the Santa Maria and the other vessels, and spending the day in prayer out of respect for the sanctity of the Sunday. How richly the Master rewarded his fidelity, all the pages of history record.

Destroy the sanctity of the Sunday and you throw civilization back into the darkness and mire of pagan materialism. You turn back the hands on the clock of progress. In the religious chaos and anarchy following the French revolution, the irreligious suppressed the observance of the Sunday only to find the revolt of outraged human nature and the interests of national progress compelling them to return to this divinely established plan. Though no friend of religion, Rousseau was eloquent in proclaiming that the observance of the Sunday was essential to the welfare of the nation.

The overwhelming majority of Catholics observe this third commandment with admirable fidelity. By

the thousands, hundreds of millions they come—a vast army wending their way through the bleak country side as well as in the populous cities. Peasant, artisan, housewife, merchant, scholar, king — there are in that mighty and innumerable throng that comes to bend their heads in worship before their uplifted King and Saviour, to assist at that “clean oblation that is offered up among all nations from the rising of the sun even to the going down thereof.”

A Prophecy Fulfilled

There is no part of the habitable globe where that clean oblation foretold by Malachy is not offered. The traveler witnesses the fulfillment of this prophecy all the way from the little ice-covered chapel in the far stretches of the frozen North where the black robed Jesuit missionary raises the Eucharistic Lord before the adoring eyes of the Eskimos, down to the burning sands of the Sahara where the white gowned son of St. Dominic opens the portals of heaven and brings down upon the altar the King of Kings to listen to the prayers that flow from the strange tongues of the untutored children of Africa. From the mission chapels in the valleys of the Orient to the ones that nestle in the eternal snows of the Matterhorn, from the great crowded cathedrals in the populous cities of Europe to the little adobe chapels that dot the wind swept plains of Arizona and New Mexico — everywhere there is offered up that sublime drama of the Mass, the mystery of mysteries, the unbloody renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary. In that great hymn of praise that rises up from all the corners of the world there is mingled the soft liquid tongue of the Italian, the Spaniard, and the Frenchman with the sharper notes of the Teuton and the Slav, embracing in its final volume all the tongues of mankind as it swells into a mighty paean of adoration before the throne of the most High. What a wonderful privilege it is to be a member of this countless host, the Catholic Church, the kingdom of God on earth!

It is the spectacle of this mighty throng of over three hundred millions of men, women and children, leaving aside the cares of the world and marching through rain and snow and inclement weather to Mass every Sunday, that constitutes a source of never-ending wonder and mystery to our separated brethren. In spite of musicals, paid singers, and extensive advertising their own churches remain so largely empty. Why the difference? One is a Church divinely established, dowered with a Pentecostal fire which has never ceased to burn. Conscious of her divinely appointed mission to speak as the voice of God to all mankind, she commands the worship of God and demands the attendance at Sunday Mass of every Catholic worthy of the name.

The other churches founded by men, conscious of no divine commission, endowed with no divine authority, dare not command. They entreat, plead, cajole and entice. But mankind perceives the uncertainty and vacillation in their voices. They respond according to their mood and caprice. The result is empty Churches, and the decadence of religious worship among them. Is it not evident then to every fair-minded person, Catholic or non-Catholic, that the policy of the Catholic Church in removing attendance at divine worship on Sunday from the quick-sands of mood and whim and placing it on the solid foundation of principle and law, is wise and just? Indeed, her action in so doing is not one of expediency but of principle. It is a compliance with the law of nature, with the voice of reason, and with a divine command.

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