

The Case of ... Dancing in the Aisles

This is kind of a funny case, I guess. I mean, you could laugh — else you'd cry. Liturgical dancers, rock bands, people swaying and clapping their hands as they bang on drums or shake tambourines. And don't even get me started on the Sign of Peace.

You know what I'm talking about. If it's not something actually crazy that makes your jaw drop, it's legions of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Sometimes it seems like there are more people distributing the Eucharist than receiving it.

I call this the Case of Dancing in the Aisles, and it all came about because of wrong-headed ideas about the best way for the faithful to participate at Mass.

But before we talk about what's wrong, let's talk about what's right. The Mass is, first and foremost, a *sacrifice*. It's the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross at Calvary. The priest presents this to God the Father on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins. It's the same Sacrifice, offered once for all, re-presented at each Mass.

Yes, the Mass is a community meal, a sharing among the people there. But that's not what it primarily is. First and foremost, it's a Sacrifice. That is the Catholic mindset; it is a Protestant idea to call it a meal. That comes from faulty Protestant theology, which denies the essential physicality of the sacraments as a means to transmit grace.

It's a theme in all of these *Case Files* — but the liturgy, what we *do*, must reflect what we believe. The liturgy is the public prayer of the Church; it can't be out of step with truth.

The liturgical reform movement of the 20th century had two pretty laudable goals. The first was to help the laity understand the Mass better. The second was to increase their “active participation” in it. You are going to hear that phrase a lot, and it's misunderstood.

If the Mass is the prayer of the Church and reflects Catholic truth, then helping people understand it can only be good, right? Well, that's true — but perhaps the way they went about it was bad. After the Second Vatican Council — and, it's kind of important to remember that the documents about the liturgy from the Council don't actually mandate the changes that were made, and in some cases ask for the exact opposite — anyway, after Vatican II, the Mass was dramatically simplified.

You can see the idea. If it's simpler, it's easier to understand, right?

Maybe not. Perhaps it would be better to say if it's simpler, there is *less* to understand.

It's no secret Catholic education and catechesis is in a terrible state. Catholics just don't know their Faith. Making the Mass simpler helps in that it makes people feel better because they don't look ignorant. But it doesn't help them get holier or learn the Faith.

Put simply, the liturgy should lift people up, encourage them to learn more so they do understand, challenge them and stretch them. They need to make an effort. It would be, dare I say it, a kind of active intellectual participation.

Jokes aside, the dumbing down (and, make no mistake, that's kind of what this was) has a negative effect. Not only aren't the laity challenged to learn more, but the beautiful prayers just aren't there any more. For centuries, laity could meditate on them and grow in holiness. Not anymore.

And it's not just the case these prayers were really beautiful or poetic. Sure, they were that — they *are* that, because they are still in the Tridentine Form of the Mass, of course. But they often dealt with specifically Catholic subjects: Purgatory, saints, the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist. Heck, the Church Herself!

Liturgical reformers wanted to make the Mass easier to understand. Like I say, a laudable goal — but they went about it the wrong way. They didn't make anything easier to understand; they just took out the hard stuff — and a lot of that hard stuff helped people understand the Faith, teaching them Catholic doctrines.

It would be like trying to make people better at weightlifting by taking all the heavy weights out of the gym. Sure, people are benching easier but — well, do you even lift, bro?

And speaking of physical activity: “active participation” — it's a source of a lot of confusion. Too many people — most confused useful idiots, but some modernists eager to change the Church's doctrine for the worse — think this means external activities of the laity at Mass. But that's not the case. Yes, we should engage through postures, responses, prayers, but also with a correct interior disposition of our souls. Don't take my word for it. Here's Pope Benedict XVI;

It should be made clear that the word “participation” does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council must be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life. ... Fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated, offering one's life to God in unity with the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the whole world.

The Pope isn't saying external actions a bad — far from it. There are lots of external actions which reveal our interior disposition. When we kneel or genuflect, we reveal our understanding we are in the actual Presence of God and acknowledge Him with humility and devotion. When we make the Sign of the Cross, stand for the Gospel, fold our hands in prayer — you get the idea.

But the interior disposition comes *first* and the actions *follow* from that. They reveal that. External actions by themselves aren't what the Church is looking for here.

And, of course, just because someone is sitting quietly and silently doesn't mean he's not actively participating. The Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* talks about the liturgy, and you should read it. Seriously. Take an hour or two and read it if you haven't. It calls for exterior activities such as “acclamations, responses, psalms, hymns ... actions, gestures, and bodily postures,” as well as “sacred silence at the proper times.”

It makes sense. How can we be actively participating if our minds are so distracted by movements and noise and speaking we can't think? How could we listen to the Gospel or the homily if we were distracted with something else? Silence, mental prayer and really concentrating on what is happening are participation. And only the most bone-headed jock would say using your mind and soul instead of your body is “inactive”.

All this makes all kinds of sense. Unfortunately, catechesis is a mess and Catholics aren't sensible any more. And, like I said, there are all kinds of snakes in the grass who want to twist the Church's words for their own ends. One of the most troubling ends here is the way the laity are encouraged to be “little priests”.

What do I mean? There are liturgical roles which were traditionally exclusive to the priesthood. Now, those lines are being blurred. Confusion is created. People don't understand the difference, or even see there IS a difference. Pope Saint John-Paul II said it better than I could in 1998.

“Full participation does not mean that everyone does everything, since this would lead to a clericalizing of the laity and a laicizing of the priesthood; and this was not what the Council had in mind. The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical, and polyphonic, respecting the different roles assigned by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise.” (1998 Ad Limina address to the Bishops of the United States)

If you make laity into priests, you risk making priests into laity. You challenge the very IDEA of the priesthood, the reality of the sacraments as well, sacraments. Without the priesthood, they are just pretty ceremonies without any power of their own.

Really, it goes further than just the Mass. That's where it starts, but it challenges the very foundation of the Catholic faith. The priesthood instituted by Jesus Christ who bring us the sacraments.

All of this is very Protestant. Really, that's the first thing each of the “Reformers” did ... attack the Mass, remove the priesthood, deny the sacraments. Now's not the time to debate the whys and wherefores. Maybe these people are just useful idiots and mean no harm? But none of that changes the reality; without the sacraments, without the priesthood, even without a clear UNDERSTANDING that the priesthood are DIFFERENT to us, ain't none of us getting to Heaven.

I'm sure hearing that doesn't make people happy, but it's not my job ... or the liturgy's job ... to make people happy, to make them feel good, to make them feel “more included.”

If you get a warm and fuzzy feeling at Mass because you feel included in a group of really great people, great! Power to you! But that ain't the end goal, it won't get you to Heaven. We should feel holy fear, humility, joy and a sense of burning gratitude and adoration as we are in the presence of Almighty God who died for our sins. Let's be honest here; no-one at Mass except God Himself is "a really great person". We're all sinners – that's why we're there!

That doesn't mean they're not nice people, not your friends, that you can't enjoy being with them. Go up to them, shake their hand, share a joke, have a coffee and a donut with them ... but do it AFTER Mass or BEFORE Mass, willya? Do it OUTSIDE of the body of the Church.

The Church is a sacred space. Sacred means "separate", set aside for God. This means we should behave differently in there. Dancing, clapping, cheering, being friendly and exuberant .. these are all good things, but they have their place.

But none of these things are appropriate at Mass. They give the impression the Mass is a social party hour, rather than what it truly is; a serious and profound event where Jesus Christ is continually offering Himself up to God the Father for our redemption.

But surely clapping is okay, right? I mean, if its someone's birthday or the band played a REALLY great rendition of "How Great Thou Art?"

I'm afraid not. In his book, the Spirit of the Liturgy, Pope Benedict said;

"Whenever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment"

Alright, no tambourines, no dancing, no clapping, no glad-handing. We get the idea. But what about the laity participating in the liturgy by being ministers? Lectors, bringing up the gifts, distributing holy communion? These things have become the norm.

And they are wrong. Not only did Vatican II not call for these things, and they aren't recommended by the Church, but these things, once again, blur the lines between clergy and laity. It gives people something to do which not only they shouldn't be doing, but which someone ELSE ... someone fundamentally different to them ... should be doing.

Laity aren't priests, and priests aren't laity, The priesthood is one of God's greatest gifts to us, the means by which we receive the sacraments. To disrupt the understanding of the distinction God Himself made is very, very foolish.

Today, the average Mass bears little resemblance to what it is supposed to be – a reverent, awe-filled liturgy focused on the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, offered by the priest FOR the laity, whose interior dispositions are focused on the majestic happenings on the altar and in Heaven.

All of these innovations, intended to make the Mass something people can engage with more easily, actually hinder it. Things like clapping, holding hands, listening to hip hop music, receiving communion in the hand, having liturgical dance performances ... all of these teach the laity a false, non-Catholic theology.

I think the case is clear – we need a new liturgical reform. Not necessarily simply turning the clock back, but instead taking the laudable goals of increasing understanding and deepening participation, and promoting liturgy which will really HELP these goals, rather than hinder them.

Let's make Catholics more CATHOLIC, rather than trying make them Protestant. It's a big job, we can't do it overnight but, for now, I think this case is closed.