



“Belonging to Christ and His Church”

On a flight from Seattle to Redmond the man in the next seat told me that he had been raised Catholic. He and his wife brought up their children in the faith, but in recent years they have mostly stopped going to Mass. He prefers to commune with God in the beautiful outdoors rather than worship with others inside a church. His attitude is far from unusual. These days people are increasingly drawn to build on their own terms a personal relation with God that disconnects them from communal worship on God’s terms.

I asked my companion to imagine that he and his wife had taken pains to make their son’s 16th birthday a really memorable event. “You send fancy invitations to family and friends; you rent a hall and decorate it; you serve fine catered food. To cap it all off you buy him an over-the-top expensive birthday present. But the night before the big day your son tells you that he and his friends will be leaving for the coast in the morning and won’t be there for the party you’ve taken such care to prepare. How do you feel?” “Deeply disappointed,” he replied.

“It’s not hard to see why,” I said. “The present you’ve chosen to present to your son on his birthday should deepen his gratitude for all that you’ve given him and make him an imitator of your generosity. But his absence makes it impossible for you to give him the gift you want to give in the way you want to give it. His not being there keeps you from expressing the love you have for him as your son. He won’t even make time to come to your party to let you give him your gift that would change him for the better.”

And that’s how it must be with our heavenly Father when Catholics intentionally miss Mass. He has prepared a banquet to hand over the gift of His Son, and His children do not take the trouble to come to receive Him and be transformed from within by the gift. *That’s* disappointing.

It is true that Jesus tells us to close our door and pray to the Father in secret, but he also commands us to “Do this in memory of me”—to take part in the Mass He left us to offer *together* as members of His family of faith, the Church.

Sunday worship emerged out of the ancient Commandment to keep holy the Sabbath. *All* Jews were to leave work aside and come together to praise and thank the God of Israel for setting them free from slavery and making them His Chosen People. For His intervention changed everything and opened up a future that still called them forward. Sabbath observance reminded them that their debt of thanksgiving was a debt they could never pay down. In this same spirit Christians realized that we can never repay our debt of gratitude for God’s gift of His Son. So followers of Jesus keep holy the Lord’s Day by coming together to give thanks to the Father for calling us to share Christ’s victory over death.

In the Eucharist the Father gives his children the gift we give back to Him in sacrifice—the gift of His Son—not because He has any need to give it but because we have every need to receive it if we are to come fully into our baptismal inheritance of love.

We owe it to the Father to let Him give us the gift of His Son in the setting He has chosen to give it—the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass. Our life task, yours and mine, is to make this communal prayer which God gives His People our personal prayer as well.