

Basic Church Etiquette

By Nancy Volks D.Min.

A couple of years ago a parishioner came up to me just before Mass and the conversation went like this:

"I didn't make it here to church last week, but its okay; I went to services over at XXX church."

(A protestant church, which will remain nameless).

"How is that okay?" I asked.

The reply was simply, "Well, I made it to church, just not here!"...

"And not Catholic, either." I posed.

"What's the difference? It's all God."

Confusion is the only word that comes to mind when I think about that conversation; because there is a difference.

Prior to Vatican II it was very clear--- we never went into a Protestant or Jewish place of worship. Thank God for Vatican II and the knowledge that there are many paths to God. They are different, which is the rub in the above conversation, the paths are different, and they are **not interchangeable**. I am not saying that you cannot attend Protestant or Jewish services if you wish; please let's not go back there! Many have beautiful rituals and much to offer a seeker on the journey. However, Protestant and Jewish services are not exchangeable in your commitment to attend weekly Mass as a Roman Catholic. For the Roman Catholic it is the Mass that is the summit and center of our faith path. We are in union with Rome and the Pope is our Spiritual Leader. Yes, some Protestant Churches have *communion* but it is not exactly the same as what we say we believe. For Roman Catholics at the *consecration* at Mass it is no longer bread and wine but really Christ present to us. It is not a sign, not a symbol, not a remembrance or a re-enactment; and we follow the teachings and leadership of the Pope; therefore, we are not in *common-union* with our Protestant brothers and sisters because for Catholics the host and the blood **is Jesus the Christ**. That is what the Church teaches, that is what we believe and that is our faith-path. **It's important that you understand this difference because what takes place here in the Catholic Church defines and drives the etiquette we practice.**

In times past, social etiquette was clearly defined and prized for its discipline of behavior and character. With correct etiquette, a person was considered refined, educated and cultured. Etiquette assured that behavior was somewhat uniformed and controlled in certain company of persons and environments. It is still in existence today in certain ways. You still have to whisper in the Library. If you are late to a Broadway show in NYC they will not seat you until there is a break in the scene. Why? Well, do you really want people climbing in and out of the rows throughout the performance? Can you concentrate on your reading if people are having a conversation near you in the Library? It is just common sense. Again, I believe there is **confusion**, because we visit other faiths, we see TV evangelist preaching to people seated in arena type seats, drinking coffee and enjoying the homily. That's all very nice, but it is not Mass. Yes, we break open the Word, but that's not all we do. The reality is that our Mass is a meal and a sacrifice in which we enter into THE Sacred Ritual that unifies all Catholics. This is not a paper on the Mass (another

topic perhaps). However, each of us has the responsibility to learn about our Mass so that we can understand it intellectually and we have a responsibility to enter into this public prayer **with all our hearts**.

It is active participation, not passive learning or watching.

So what about **Mass etiquette?** **okay, here is what I was taught and learned over the years.**

1. Read the Scriptures at home the week prior, so I would have a firm grasp of Christ's teaching and be ready and open to the Celebrant's homily, the Liturgical Season and specific feast or celebration of my parish. Also, decide what I am wearing to Mass. Is my outfit appropriate? Will it distract anyone? Is it clean, and pressed. I was taught never to wear "play clothes" so sweat pants, jeans especially if liturgical minister, flip-flops, shorts are not suitable. **Looking professional is the best attire for God.**
2. Arrive early, bless yourself with Holy Water upon entering, sit up front and move to the center of the pew leaving the end of the pew for people who arrive late. **In today's world**, no texting, and turn off cell phones; better yet leave them in the locked car or at home.
3. If I was late and mass had begun the ushers should not seat me until there is a break in what is being done. Example, during the readings or if Father is giving his homily, I would have to stand in the back until they were finished and then quickly move into a nearby pew. In this way, I would not disturb those who are listening. I was taught to always sit at mass, never stand in the back for the entire mass. (Health issues aside).
4. I was taught never to have gum, food or water bottles in church. So, it would stand to reason that we should not bring in coffee – The Church is not an arena and we are not simply sharing the Word here. The Catholic Church is **a Sanctuary, Holy Ground**, and those who enter should be aware that Christ is present. We are here to **worship and take part** not to sit and watch or be entertained. We are about to enter into the **Mystery of the Mass**, union with God.
5. If the tabernacle is in the Church, I would go to my pew, genuflect and sit in silence. Because our tabernacle is in the chapel, it is okay when we enter the narthex of the church to talk and greet one another with a holy kiss or hand shake. Our Church was built with the theology that the gathered community is important and sacred. So,

when we go to our pew we bow to the Altar. In doing so, we recognize that Christ will be at this table. The table is sacred to us and deserves our respect.

6. Since our tabernacle is in the chapel, respect & silence should be maintained at all times. Also, the chapel is not a walkway to the restrooms or other places.
7. Once the community has gathered and we **begin Sacred Liturgy**, I was taught that all unnecessary talking is to stop for the entire Mass.... necessary means emergencies only.
8. I was taught to pay attention and to respond at the correct times using worship aids (if necessary) my eyes and attention should always be watching the Sanctuary and what is taking place there.
9. If I really had to go to the bathroom I needed to wait until there is movement and slip away quickly. We need to remember that some people have medical needs, so don't judge, but lets teach our kids to go to the bathroom before Mass begins.
10. I was taught never to be moving out of or returning to my seat during the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**, it is a sacred and profound time when the priest calls upon the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. It is a moment of complete awe and my behavior should reflect this.
11. Receiving communion should be handled with reverence. It should take my breath away to be so privileged to receive the Lord. The sacred body of Christ has now become part of you. The "new norm" says that if you are not receiving from the chalice, you should bow when walking pass the cup, for this too is Christ. This is my private time with my Savior. Pray or sing, but no conversation, no going through my pocket book or pockets looking for keys etc. **This is prayer time.**
12. I was taught that Mass is not over until Father passes by your pew on *his way out*. That is when you may put on your coat, straighten up the worship aids and get ready to leave.

One quick note: *If you have health issues and can't walk in a crowd, why leave early? Think about waiting until the majority leaves this way you don't need to rush, you can be sure to get the bulletin and speak to people, and check out the hall before you make your way to your car.*