

## THE PLEASURE OF CELEBRATING MASS

Pleasure? Yes, surely. After all, Mass is the best way of worshipping the God who loves us. And celebrating Mass enables us to participate in the Mystery of Faith, letting us hear the teaching of Jesus, be with him as he makes present the sacrifice of our salvation and be nourished with his own body and blood. Nothing should make us happier than this. Yet, as we look around at Mass, there are so many glum, bored, even melancholy faces on view... Something's amiss somewhere! Especially when we remember the great number of people who used to be at Mass, but now no longer.

In the title of this piece, I deliberately use the word “celebrating” not only because that denotes something pleasurable but also because it refers to all who are present, not just those whom we call “celebrants”, i.e., the priest(s). We should all be active, participating, not spectating. In that sense, we are all celebrating Mass. No more talk, please, of priests “saying” Mass and lay people “hearing” Mass.

To speak of the pleasure of celebrating Mass prompts the question, “What makes me glad to be at Mass?” There can be several responses. Here are some: being in the company of Jesus; being with people who have faith; experiencing and using my own faith and finding it strengthened; hearing God’s word and learning more about Jesus; sharing in his self-sacrifice; receiving Holy Communion; having an active part to play; experiencing the love and support of the community; being entrusted with a mission to witness and to serve; being involved in God’s eternal plan; looking forward to eternal life.

Deriving pleasure from our sharing in the Eucharist is not the most important reason for our presence there, but it is a laudable motive, often overlooked and, if appearances tell us anything, even completely absent and unknown. So let’s look at the Mass and especially those moments that can bring us contentment and satisfaction, even joy; the moments at which we are aware not only that it is good for us to be there but also that we are glad to be there.

The pleasure of celebrating Mass should start before the liturgy itself begins. Those who make their way to church are the People of God, adopted sons and daughters of the Father and therefore a family of

brothers and sisters. It is good if this relationship is conscious and evident even as we assemble before Mass. One sometimes hears remarks nowadays such as “People are very noisy in church. They should have more respect.” Or “I can’t get my prayers said for all the talking that goes on”. There ought to be an awareness of decorum before the Eucharist but it is also right and proper that people should be free to talk in church before Mass, not only about religious things but also about illnesses and anxieties, successes and disappointments, hopes and fears. This is family talk, familiar conversation and it helps us to be aware that we are brothers and sisters, concerned for one another, anxious to know what has been happening in our lives.

In some parishes the chatting comes to an end a few minutes before Mass is due to start. This allows people to prepare mentally and prayerfully by devoting a brief period to reflecting on the liturgy in which they are about to take part.

Then Mass begins - on time, it is to be hoped! Delay, a late start, unpreparedness, is an irritation for many and does nothing to foster the pleasure that we hope to experience.

The gathering process is completed by the formal procession of the priest and those with specific ministries and the Introductory Rite commences. It comprises a rapid number of differing elements and ends with the Collect prayer, spoken by the priest in the plural and therefore in the name of all present, who assent with their “Amen”.

Before going on, a few words about singing at Mass, since this early part of the Mass usually has an opening hymn and the Gloria (an acclamation intrinsic to the Order of Mass and better sung). Singing at Mass can raise hackles and I have no panacea to offer. Only let me suggest that, when feasible, those parts of Mass, and above all the acclamations, which are meant to be sung should be sung and with words faithful to the official text; and that, when there are hymns, they should be appropriate and, normally, for all to sing (and not dragged). Good singing can and should be part of the pleasure of Mass; moreover, as St Augustine tells us, it is “double value” prayer.

The celebration of the Eucharist is a series of actions making a unity of our worship. But it also requires words: words spoken, words heard and understood. The celebration of Mass “in the vernacular” is one of the great graces of the Second Vatican Council. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy, speaks very cautiously on this

matter (no.54) but it was not long before official documents of the Holy See permitted the use of modern languages throughout the Roman Rite and this extension was rapidly and fully implemented everywhere. As a priest, I celebrated Mass in Latin for nearly twenty years. I know Latin and I still miss it. But I recognise how much more I can be involved, and can enjoy, Mass in English. That seems to be the view of the vast majority.

“Latin is more dignified”, it may be claimed; not necessarily so, I would say, and in fact the latest translation of the Roman Missal has been deliberately made in order to restore the English version to a dignity of language that may have been missing from some parts of the translation of the early 1970s. “Mass in English lacks the awe and dignity of the Latin” tempts me to wonder if those two nouns mean much the same as unintelligibility. And to “Wherever you go in the world, Mass in Latin means you hear the same words”, I ask how many people know and understand Latin; and, even if you do, have you ever “heard” Mass in Latin “said” by a Spaniard? Reverting to the “pleasure” factor, I maintain that, for most of us, understanding what is being heard (and what we are ourselves saying) is really important. One can be bored or distracted when Mass is in English, but the likelihood is much greater when the language is unfamiliar, whether ancient or modern.

“The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way, a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.51). With these words the Second Vatican Council ordered a radical change in the use of the Scriptures at Mass.

Those of us with long memories will recall the preconciliar place that Scripture readings had in the Eucharist. The epistle and gospel were read in Latin by the priest, facing away from the people (and on Sundays re-read to them by the priest in English after the announcements, on the justified presumption that the people had not understood them when first read). The choice of passages for the epistle and gospel on ordinary Sundays was arbitrary and random. Many of the books of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, were never read. The psalm following the epistle and the acclamation prior to the gospel were reduced to a verse or two by the priest (and, on important days, in some churches sung by a choir in psalm tone, plainchant or polyphony); they were not repeated in English, perhaps because reckoned as of little importance. Weekday readings were even more meagre. Many priests chose to have frequent,

almost daily, “black Masses”, i.e., for the dead, with the same epistle and gospel passages, the shortest available.

The contrast nowadays is stark and welcome, with day to day continuity in the passages chosen and a wide-ranging selection from both Old and New Testaments. The psalm and gospel acclamation are carefully chosen to provide, respectively, an appropriate reflection on the first reading and a suitable introduction to the gospel. Where previously the Scripture readings had very little impact on us, whether priest or laity, the change now is truly dramatic.

Yet, despite such theoretical excellence provided by the Council, the reality can easily fall short of the ideal. What should give us great pleasure and satisfaction may be only “modified rapture”. One problem is the sheer amount of nourishment and the varied content fed to us in such a short time. Are three readings too many on Sundays? Yet two readings would mean the Old Testament and the non-gospel New Testament being heard much less frequently. So the selection in the lectionary perhaps needs revision since simply omitting the first or second reading would not be a good solution.

A different issue is the quality of the proclamation. All of us will have experienced the frustration of poorly read passages; and, although missalettes are not to be recommended, we can condone their use if the reader (or the sound system) leaves much to be desired. A sound system can be improved but the removal of a poor reader is very difficult and hazardous. The solution is not to have poor readers in the first place – but practice at a microphone in an empty church does not ensure satisfactory proclamation when there is a congregation. Perhaps the poor, whom we shall always have with us, include inadequate readers as well as the financially needy.

It may be somewhat rash to include the homily under the rubric “The pleasure of celebrating Mass”. There are many priests – and bishops – who enjoy preparing and giving a homily and perhaps some listeners who are pleased with what they hear. The homily offers an opportunity for both the homilist and the congregation to deepen their understanding and appreciation of Scripture and it may even give pleasure. But *caveat homilista*. Nowadays a homily, at least in a Catholic church, has to be brief if it has to have much chance of being appreciated. A priest of long experience in our diocese of Galloway, speaking of homilies, favoured the mantra: be prepared, be brief, be gone. And people remember the

stories and anecdotes while the serious points these are meant to illustrate are soon forgotten...

The General Intercessions (or Prayer of the Faithful) is a welcome restoration of an early and long lost practice. There is an art or skill in composing the General Intercessions (unless you take refuge in published versions). The Constitution on the Liturgy (no.53) and the Missal give some basic guidance. But there is a certain amount of freedom allowed, which enables topical concerns to be included, as well as issues relevant to the assembly which is present. A limited number of carefully chosen intercessions, an economy of words and suitable silent pauses after each intercession can provide an attractive and appreciated Prayer of the Faithful.

For the Preparation of the Gifts, the rite is now very simple (replacing the preconiliar prayers that suggested that our sacrifice was the bread and wine). However, the opportunity for representatives of the congregation to bring the gifts to the altar is a further manner of participation, so much a basic principle of the renewed liturgy.

We have become so used to a variety of Eucharistic Prayers, each said aloud and in English, that we now take them for granted. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was a startling, even daring, innovation and, for most of us, an appreciated chance to be more prayerfully caught up in the solemn moments. It is the priest alone whose ministry it is to recite the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, yet the congregation not only shares prayerfully in what the priest is doing and saying, but has the right and duty, in the three acclamations, preferably sung (Holy, holy; Memorial Acclamation; Great Amen) to show its faith, agreement and worship.

Eucharistic Prayer I is the previous Roman Canon. The new ones (twelve in all) include two elements not evident in the surviving Prayer. First, they follow a logical order of the constituent elements of a Eucharistic Prayer; and second, they have a dual epiclesis in which the Holy Spirit is invoked for the consecration of the bread and wine and for the sanctification of those who are present.

In celebrating Mass we are making present Christ's paschal mystery. We are thus looking to the past. But the Eucharist also looks to the future and especially to eternal life with God. This eschatological dimension is intrinsic to the Mass and (should be) a source of hope and joy. The Scriptures read and the prayers said constantly refer to our eternal life. Three other "eschatological moments" should be noted: the Memorial

Acclamations, the prayer “Deliver us, Lord” which follows the Lord’s Prayer; and, before holy communion, “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb” (quoting Apoc.19:9). To receive the Lord and be united with him through holy communion fills us with joy; to know that this gift is a foretaste and pledge of the marriage feast of the Lamb is cause for wonder and rejoicing.

These days the Communion Rite involves all present in a manner previously lacking. Together we say the Lord’s Prayer, we express to one another our wish for unity and peace among us and, best of all, we are invited to receive holy communion under both kinds. This last is, for me, a reason for true rejoicing. The Constitution on the Liturgy (no.55) is very hesitant. However when, in accordance with the decree, the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland requested the Holy See for what we thought fairly broad authorisation, we were surprised to receive general permission, restricted only in cases where there was danger of the Precious Blood being spilled. Such exceptional cases are very few, if any.

We used to be told that giving the chalice to the laity was not necessary (“It is the risen Christ we receive and therefore whole and entire in each species”), wine was expensive, there was the danger of spilling or lack of reverence; and it would take too long and be unhygienic. These reasons are now seen as excuses, without real validity, given the importance of offering the chalice to all communicants. Yes, importance. Jesus says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53) and maintains this assertion in the face of the obvious objections; the Eucharist is a meal or banquet and that implies food and drink (and not only food moistened by being dipped in liquid); receiving both species is a fuller sign of the sacrament; and, perhaps unnoticed, the wine, when consecrated, is intimately connected with the new and eternal covenant between God and his people and which was sealed with the blood of Christ shed on Calvary. There seems still to be reluctance in many countries (even where wine is plentiful and often on the dining table) so, if we live where the ancient custom has been restored, let’s be grateful and rejoice.

Years ago, as students in the seminary, we spent another quarter of an hour after Mass, “making our thanksgiving”. Even in my school days, when I went to weekday Mass, I sometimes had to leave the church immediately Mass was over – until one day, when an old parishioner put out his arm as I passed and told me that I should not be in such a hurry. “Go and kneel down and say thanks to God”. I sometimes recall those incidents these days when Mass ends so quickly after Holy Communion

and the church empties at once. Life moves faster now than years ago, people naturally like to chat after Mass and, if Holy Communion has taken some minutes to distribute, many will have had an opportunity for prayer after receiving. Even so, perhaps the period of silence recommended before the final prayers could be a little longer than it normally is at present.

In the new translation, the priest's final words (the Dismissal) now have four different options. These bring out a point only implicit formerly, namely, that we are bidden to leave not just because Mass is over but rather because we have work to do outside, witnessing to our faith and performing loving service of others.

In St John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of the apostles (John 13:3-11) and then told them to do what he had just done. Yet it might seem that we comply only once a year, at the Mass of the Lord's Supper. In fact, however, the command has a much wider remit than washing the feet of those at Mass for then our charity would be very limited and indeed neglectful. Our proper observance of the Lord's command and example is by a universal love, without boundaries. I quote the striking words of Blessed John Paul II. Speaking of our concern for those in need, he states: "This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our eucharistic celebrations is judged" (Apostolic Letter *Mane nobiscum Domine*, no.28). Striking words requiring our constant attention and which, if observed, will bring us contentment and fulfilment.

It is hurtful, if we enjoy celebrating Mass, to be told that "Mass is boring". It seems like a personal rejection. There is no magic solution for the complaint especially if there is a large and diverse congregation at Mass, as there normally is in a parish. The Eucharist celebrated in a more intimate atmosphere or on a special occasion may have the unintended consequence of exacerbating the feeling that "ordinary Masses" are tedious.

We can do something to help. Priests, lay ministers and parish liturgy committees should be mindful of the complaint and open to change and improvement, but remaining faithful to the prescribed ritual. And those who declare themselves bored can be reminded that the Eucharist is not spectator entertainment, that they are invited to participate actively and that the community longs for their involvement in its desire to worship God worthily and well. Then we may discover that the celebration of Mass together, as well as a duty and a privilege, is also a pleasure!

I make no secret of my preference for the Ordinary Rite rather than the Extraordinary. It is not only a personal preference but a conviction that the Vatican II renewal of the rite of Mass (along with subsequent authorised developments) has given us a liturgy that is better balanced, richer and, of course, a more participatory celebration, a liturgy that is a pleasure to celebrate.

I hope, therefore, that it is not perverse of me to end with a quotation from the Extraordinary Rite which may surprise but is undeniably apt. “*Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam*” to which I happily add “*ne non senectutem meam. Amen.*”

(‘I shall go to the altar of God, to God who gives joy to my youth’ (from Psalm 42 and the opening words of Mass in the Extraordinary Rite); to which I happily add: ‘and to my old age as well. Amen’)

## BIOGRAPHICAL

Maurice Taylor, ordained 1950, lectured (philosophy and theology) St Peter’s College, Cardross, 1955-65; rector, Royal Scots College, Spain, 1965-74; parish priest, East Kilbride, 1974-81; bishop of Galloway, 1981-2004; chairman, ICEL, 1997-2002.

Website: [www.bishopmauricetaylor.org.uk](http://www.bishopmauricetaylor.org.uk)