

WHY PEOPLE MISS MASS

BY

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ALLUP polls, research techniques and investigations of all kinds appear nowadays as an essential preliminary to action. Case histories, clinical fashion, illustrate all sorts of books. So long as excessive importance is not attached to the results obtained, and a cross-section of opinion is not made to stand for the whole truth, such a method is of value for

it can uncover facts and tendencies that are otherwise little suspected, or if known but hardly realised.

Some two years ago *La Vie Spirituelle* published the answers to a questionnaire that had been sent out on the subject of the divine office. And there have been others on the same lines on the use of vernacular in liturgy and so on. Although these investigations refer primarily to France and the conditions obtaining there, the questions and answers can furnish us with a useful form of self-examination, and, discounting some of the practical applications, we can at least recognise the principles and perhaps find help in some of the problems that confront the Church in this country.

At the end of his popular booklet on the Mass (*Qu'est-ce que la Messe?* which has reached a sale of upwards of 20,000 in France) Père Chéry, O.P., reports the results of an enquiry he conducted on the question of why people miss Mass—their reasons and what can be done to remedy a state of affairs that is by no means confined to France.

Many of the conclusions reached and much of the evidence collected tally with that to be found in *Revolution in a City Parish*. In the following short summary of Père Chéry's work I have omitted much that does not concern us in England, and cannot, of course, in one short article quote the detailed answers he received and reproduces in his booklet.

Why, then, do Catholics miss Mass? Obviously in many cases because they have no realisation of what it is, they are indifferent, faith is weak and there is a lack of religious sense or education. Père Chéry reduces all these and many others to three categories: general causes, secondary causes, causes to do with the Mass itself.

The general and secondary causes he dismisses in some thirty small pages. They are those mentioned above, while the secondary causes refer more particularly to France—anti-clericalism, human respect and political reasons. Happily, as a rule, we have not to

contend with these latter in England. By far the greater part of the enquiry is devoted to causes to do with the Mass itself and repays a fuller analysis, for if the general causes mentioned require general remedies—intensified ‘Catholic action’ and the rest—those that concern the Mass itself may be treated more directly and specifically.

The first two heads under which Père Chéry groups the answers to part of his enquiry on this question may be taken together for one is the consequence of the other; boredom, lack of interest in what is being done at the altar arises from ignorance of what the Mass is, what it contains, what it does, what is its function in the life of humanity and of the Church. Doctrinal and practical teaching, particularly of the children in school, would seem to be the remedy. Even nowadays—and in spite of all that is being written and preached about the Mass and the people’s part in it (in France at any rate), about making worship a living thing with live people in the nave answering, praying with the priest at their head before the altar—there are many schools, and by no means all primary ones, where the boys or girls are present at Mass each day. But in this manner. The school enters the chapel as the priest comes to the altar. As he begins Mass, from the back of the chapel one of the staff reads out a form of morning prayers which lasts probably until the offertory. With a couple of hymns and the Angelus, a decade or two of the rosary, morning worship comes to an end at much the same moment as does the Mass. The children can go to Holy Communion, of course, but by their practical experience they are not led to connect together the two elements of what they are taught about the Mass and their actual assistance at it. Any idea of the importance of Mass in their lives, therefore, its place as community worship in the life of the Church, is entirely wanting; small wonder that when they leave school they tend to look upon it as one of the superfluous activities connected with school-life that can be given up as soon as they leave school. That instance refers to France, but is such a practice entirely unknown in England?

The Mass is for many unattractive, because they have nothing to do during Mass. Frequently, no doubt, it is their own fault, but not always, for not rarely matters are so arranged that they can do little more than make an act of presence. They fulfil their obligation—a hurried half hour of a Sunday or holiday morning—by going to Mass; they ‘hear’ Mass, though sometimes even the physical act of hearing is impossible. In an England that shows increasing signs of secularism it is a comforting sight to see a packed church of a Sunday morning—until one compares what it could be with what it is.

There is a sort of romantic Catholicism about that glories in 'the blessed mutter of the Mass' and all that goes with it. But muttering, appropriate as it may be for our private prayers, is not what is wanted for our public ones. When the collect is said or the Gospel read surely the people are meant to hear and follow—as best they may in books if they know no Latin—and if they are prevented from doing so it seems that there is something wrong.

The packed church on a Sunday morning with its silent congregation is an impressive sight. But how much more impressive and more effective if the people would raise the roof with their *Gloria* and their *Credo*, alternate with their priest the dialogue before the Preface, assent with their vociferous *Amen* to the offering made in their name in the Canon.

The question becomes acute with the newly instructed convert. He is taught carefully about the Mass, he knows perhaps its structure, he is beginning to find his way about in the missal. Thus prepared he is pitchforked into this Christian assembly. Sitting at the back of a large church—though the largeness of the church is not the root of the trouble: it occurs in others—he can see in the distance, though he may be so unfortunate as to be able to see nothing, a priest in vestments moving at the altar, from time to time he can catch a murmur, but what with the strangeness of the language and the rapidity with which it is uttered he cannot make out a word. All he has to direct him is a bell at certain points; the elevation stands out, and then the communion. And a few moments later the congregation is leaving the church. And that is the central act of the Catholic religion. No wonder that converts often feel isolated from their fellow Catholics; this isolation begins in church where it should be least of all in evidence, where community of prayer, of worship and of sacrifice should eliminate it and form the proper foundation for the building up of the parish, the Christian community.

Conditions can be worse, of course, than those just described. There is at least one church in these islands in which on Sundays Masses follow one another at half-hourly intervals and as the priest goes to the altar another goes to the pulpit. Notices followed by sermon proceed simultaneously with Mass; there is a pause for the elevation, but none for the communion which has begun, at the hands of a third priest, soon after the offertory. The priest at the altar and the people in the nave are not only not in communication with each other, they are completely separated.

Low Masses 'with music', the rosary said aloud during Mass, and, in fact, all methods of doing two things at once appear as just

incomprehensible when you try to explain them to an intelligent enquirer.

A great part of the answer to our difficulties lies in instruction: preaching the Mass, its meaning and its place as the central act of our religion, with some emphasis on the fact that our religion is a social one and that, in consequence, its worship is social too. For just as the social character of baptism is ignored so is that of the Mass.

The restoration of sung Mass to its proper place in the life of the parish—a Mass sung by the faithful, of course, and at an hour when people can go to communion—and, as a step towards this, dialogue Mass, are two obvious ways of getting people to come. They will come because they have a function and are no longer spiritual proletarians. But it must all be explained at very great length and, eventually, in great detail. Nor must the instruction be confined to the ordinary of the Mass; the liturgical year, the life of Christ in his Mysteries, the theme of the proper Masses of the year, the application of the biblical passages that are read, be it remembered, principally for the instruction of the faithful, are all part of what must be made to live if the Mass is to come alive in the souls of the faithful. Ignorance of the scriptures, it has been said, is ignorance of Christ, and in this connection it is pertinent to call to mind that though we can study or meditate on the scriptures at home it is only in church that the Bible comes to life, in the prayer of the Church, and to pray the Bible means to use it in the liturgy of the Church, the prayer of the Body of Christ, a reflection of the life of that Body as it is manifested in the liturgical year.

The liturgy of the Church is not merely her official prayer; it is a varied, attractive, vivid form of our Mother's teaching, a book lying open on her knees turned by her each day for the education of her children. They should not be deprived of what she offers them. 'Try in every way', writes Pius XII, 'with the means and helps that your prudence deems best, that clergy and people become one in mind and heart, and that the Christian people take such an active part in the Liturgy that it becomes a truly sacred action of due worship to the Eternal Lord in which the priest, chiefly responsible for the souls of his parish, and the ordinary people are united together'. (*Mediator Dei*.)