

Why Don't Protestants Feel Welcome at a Catholic Mass?

This is a topic that I am sure will find me in trouble with both sides. While I won't claim to know *all* the nuances in this area, I do want the gentle reader to appreciate that I have some experience in this matter, and I'm going to summarize it and let the gentle reader decide for himself if it is sufficient.

Over the years, I have visited several different churches at least once at the request of friends. I don't remember all of them, but I've been to Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Mormon services. I married a Baptist woman, and have been to numerous Baptist churches, several of them many times. In exchange, to encourage her participation in Catholic services, we did go to St. Francis Xavier in Sumter, South Carolina. At the time, it was rated as the most diverse church in South Carolina, and was ranked fifth nationwide. She felt it was a good blend of Baptist and Catholic traditions, a compromise. Finally, my time in the military forced me to attend innumerable nondenominational services, or else not experience a service at all. I don't know the backgrounds of the ministers, but the sheer number has me convinced I did get a good variety of views and practices.

And I'm not content to base assessments solely on my experiences. I found the letters of C. S. Lewis talking about church life and his decision to choose the Anglican church over others, as well as St. Newman's biography concerning his own conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, illuminating. I have listened to my daughters' (who did not stay Catholic), stepdaughter's and stepson's opinions on going to a Catholic church. Brandon Vogt's book *Return: How to Draw Your Child Back to the Church* was inspirational to me, and influenced much of what I have to say on this topic. And of course, I have paid attention to the most observant people of all -- the comedians. If one wants to see a familiar experience in a whole new light, no one can help more than they. They see the inconsistencies and oddities of life that most people gloss over without thought. It's this ability that makes them so funny.

I understand that there is great variety within the different churches. I've been to Lutheran services that looked so much like a Catholic mass, that it was the wedding ring on the minister's finger that convinced me I was not at a Catholic church. Also, the size of a church of any faith affects how friendly it is. Still, one cannot deny there is a difference between Protestant and Catholic services, and I hope my two tales will help show the difference. My description of a Catholic going to a Protestant service is based on personal experiences, although not all were at the same service. Likewise, my descriptions of a Protestant going to a Catholic mass is based on comments and questions I have received from my non-Catholic friends, family and my own efforts to look for things that have deeper meanings than is obvious. I hope the gentle reader will not be offended, but rather will take things with a "grain of salt" and see how different people look at things. Considering how many times my editor commented "I've never heard of this," I think I did at least a decent job in identifying differences.

A) What Is It Like for a Catholic to Go to a Protestant Service?: You enter the church, and the first thing you see is three or five women standing in the narthex talking. There will not be two or four. Maybe there is one, but if that's the case, you might as well walk down the block to the Hardee's to get a coffee because it is way too early. All of them stop talking as soon as they see you, and look at you like you were the master arriving at the unknown hour. They were faithfully waiting for you (Matthew 24:46-47). They ask you who you are, but they don't ask if this is your first time there. They would know if you had been there before.

One of the ladies escorts you to the pews. Her home is where they do Bible study, and she hopes you can join them. She tells you she wished she could introduce you to Billy Bob, who raises money for Lottie Moon, but he's not here yet. But she's really excited you came today, because Annie Mae is getting baptized! She introduces you to Betsy Sue, and goes back to the antechamber. Betsy Sue is a kindly old woman, and is delighted to make your acquaintance. She asks if you are a Christian.

The chancel has a nice-looking lectern, and even a credence table (but it is empty!?), but no altar. How can they call this a worship service without an altar for the sacrifice? You look up and see a beautiful cross, but Jesus is missing. Betsy Sue seems to notice your concern, and asks if everything is okay. You say, "Yes, it's just a little different than I'm used to." She says, "Yes, we're a lot more open and friendly than most churches. We don't let anything come between us and sweet Jesus."

And you have to admit, it is friendly. About two-thirds of those there, obviously families, are standing up in the pews like flowers in a garden, while the other third are scattered among them, passing from family group to family group like bees. You can't help but notice how drab the walls are. They are bare. No images of biblical heroes or biblical events to gently remind one of the story of God's salvation. Just then, Betsy Sue nudges your arm. "That's Annie Mae's parents who just came in. They're divorced, but isn't it beautiful how they put their differences aside for her baptism?" You sincerely agree with her on that matter. As the minutes tick by, all the bees come by individually to introduce themselves to you, and to get caught up-to-date with Betsy Sue. Without asking, you now know that Tommy broke his arm at a friend's house two days ago, Johnny is probably going to be the MVP of his Little League team if they win the championship next week, and Simon and Beth are already packing for college.

Suddenly, three men enter from the right, all dressed in sports jackets, but only the one in the middle is wearing a tie. The lead man walks up to the lectern, while the other two sit in chairs up on the chancel. The guy with the tie gets a slightly larger and more comfortable looking chair. You learn more about the private lives of this community. Old Man Johnson had his tractor break down, and it's harvest time for his crop. An appeal is made for anyone who can loan him one until he can get his fixed. Deacon Smith's wife is going to the hospital tomorrow for her first chemotherapy treatment, and would like everyone to pray for her. Cecil Howard reported that the damage to the camp from last year's tornado is all repaired, and church retreats can start again in two weeks. This news gets a short round of applause from the congregation. Finally, Billy Bob (who seems to have appeared out of nowhere) is asked to report on the Lottie Moon drive. Billy Bob stands up, announces that 90% of their goal has already been reached with still a month to go. He is extremely grateful for all the support to the missions, and appeals to everyone to dig just a little bit more to make it a success. At last, the man with the tie stands up and thanks the deacon and all the others for their work and prayers. Betsy Sue tells you this is Reverend Harvel, and that he is a God-fearing man. Figuring the service will now begin, you reach for a missalette, but don't see any. Instead, there is an assorted collection of Bibles that were obviously donated. The reverend announces which version and edition he is using. Of course, none of those on the pew match. "No big deal," you figure, and grab the closest one to you.

He points out the baptism of Annie Mae that will take place in a few minutes, and asks all that are following along to turn to Haggai 1:10-11, which of course he not only had bookmarked with a sticky tab, but actually had it opened to already. He reads the passage and then goes on to his own interpretation as you struggle to find it. Just as you do, he tells you to go to another passage in the Bible, but before you even get to this epistle, he has directed you to a third passage. At this point, you just give up on the idea of following along in the Bible, and decide to just listen. After fifteen minutes

of preaching, he has quoted twenty pieces of scripture from various parts of the Bible, all of them blended into his sermon, which focused on how the drought that is plaguing our farmers is a test of faith in God that we need to pass.

After the service, everybody heads towards the chancel (!!!) and go out the Priest's Door to the side, but every last one of them invites you to a fellowship brunch. They do everything short of grabbing you by the hand and dragging you with them, so you oblige them and join. Billy Bob comes to meet you and tells you all about the missions in Africa and Asia, the money he raises for Lottie Moon, and tells you how thankful he, Lottie and God will be if you help. A group of old ladies proudly talk about their upcoming Quilting Bee for Bibles event. Young mothers ask you to come to some event you don't remember the name of, where their homemade pastries will be featured in the Cakewalk for Christ fundraiser. Several of their husbands show up, and each woman proudly talks about how he is helping in this event. One is donating lumber and delivery, two others are carpenters putting something or other together, and it seems to go on *ad infinitum*.

B) A Protestant Visiting a Catholic Service: You walk up to the entrance. There are two men standing there opening the doors for you. They make it a point to say hi, but then turn their attention to whoever is behind you. As you walk in, artwork overwhelms you -- statues and paintings and stained glass windows. You recognize Bible scenes in the artwork, and also several saints, and you wonder how they can call themselves Christian amid such idolatry. Why, there are even flowers and candles in front of some of the statues.

You hear someone say, "Excuse me," and you see a man looking at you with an inquiring face. He asks, "One?" and holds up a single finger. Your own face twists into a peculiar look. He then asks, "Are you here by yourself?" You nod yes, to which he replies, "Follow me." He leads you into the chapel, and quickly finds a pew and gestures for you to sit down there. You look around. The silence is deafening. Except for a few parents minding their children, everyone is either kneeling in prayer or sitting still and facing the front of the church. As new people come in, you notice that they all quickly kneel by the pew and make the same funny motion with the right hand before entering the pew. Once in their seat, most of them immediately kneel down again to pray, beginning with that same weird motion of the right hand.

At the front of the church is a large platform. A thick, heavy table dominates the platform, and it looks like it is made of marble. Behind this table are three large intricately decorated chairs. The center one is larger than the two that flank it. Above the chairs is (Oh my God!) a nearly-naked Jesus hanging on a cross. Jesus is alive in all His glory. If they insist on idolatry, could they not at least show Jesus some respect and clothe him?! Looking elsewhere, you notice a small billboard with apparently random numbers on it. At least they have a pulpit and a Communion Table, but its cluttered with all kinds of dishes. The Communion Table is supposed to reserved for communion with Jesus!

Just then a bell rings from near the antechamber and everybody stands up. The choir begins to sing and you see a procession headed by someone carrying a small cross with Jesus on it, as if the large one above the platform was not enough. This person is wearing a black robe with a loose-fitting white shirt over it, and he is followed by two others dressed in the same manner. They are holding candles. Finally, there is a man dressed in what looks like a gaudy table cloth draped over him. He is carrying a golden book.

This procession slowly walks towards the platform, and upon reaching it performs different tasks in a mechanical way. The cross with Jesus and the candles are placed in holders, and then the

bearers go to what are obviously their designated posts. The man methodically places the book on a stand on the big table, and then he kisses the table! And now you notice that the garment the man is wearing closely matches the cloth on the table he just kissed.

This man begins to facilitate a series of haunting prayers, and everyone here recites them as one in a monotonous fashion. It's quite unnerving, like a scene out of Stephen King's "Children of the Corn." At one point, everyone beats themselves on the chest. Even the Lord's Prayer sounds strange, and everyone stops just before the end so this man can insert something before they finish. Finally, this man sits in the largest chair behind the table, and a man who dresses like a proper preacher comes up on the platform and gets behind the pulpit.

You instinctively look for a Bible in the pew, but don't see one. Instead, there are a bunch of books that look like over-sized Reader's Digest magazines. You flip through one and become even more puzzled than before. Some parts have random writing, some have several paragraphs of scripture, and others have songs. You put it down in defeat. The woman next to you notices this and holds her magazine so you can see where she is at. She points to a bold-faced number and then to that little billboard on the platform. It takes a moment, but you realize that the top number on the billboard matches the number in her magazine. You thank her, pick back up your magazine and find it. You are able to follow along for the last couple of sentences, but then the preacher steps to the side.

Presently, the choir sings what appears to be a variation of the psalms written in the magazine. Furthermore, there is one line they treat as a refrain in a pop song instead of reading it straight through. But that ends shortly, and the preacher comes back to recite what is called the second reading from an epistle of Paul. Finally, something biblical! Your eyes scan ahead and see a gospel coming up. You begin to wonder how the preacher is going to tie this all together, as neither reading seems to match the gospel. But then, to your disappointment, he leaves the pulpit after reading from Paul, and then the man in the funny garment comes up to read the gospel. When he's done, he mentions the bishop's stewardship appeal is still going on and the parish goal isn't met yet, and that the Knights of Columbus will have a pancake breakfast after mass. He then gives something like a sermon, but instead of using scripture to explain all the evil in the world, he seems to suggest the readings are to help us understand how to understand what is going on in the world. You actually find this intriguing, but it doesn't last. Before you know it, a song is played, the basket is passed around, and the eerie chanting starts all over again. Except now, everyone is constantly changing position from sitting, to standing, to kneeling, to standing again, to kneeling again. Aerobics class should be this intense!

Eventually, another song is sung as people begin to file out of the pews and head up to the platform where this man and a few others are handing out something that looks like bread, and offering a gold cup that appears to be (OMG) wine! What would Jesus say about drinking alcohol? You stand up to go see what it's about, but the woman who helped you before asks in a quiet voice if you are Catholic. You shake your head and say no. She then tells you that you can't go up. So you let her pass, and go back to kneeling again. After what seems like forever, the gaudily dressed man goes back to the marble table and cleans it up. (Doesn't anyone volunteer to do this for him after the service?) When he is satisfied with his clean-up, he goes to sit down, and everyone in the church sits with him.

After a brief pause, he stands up and offers a blessing, and the procession forms up again and leaves the church with everyone else lining up behind it as they pass. As you leave, you see him briefly talking to several of the church members like a celebrity at a big event. A couple of men in military-like clothing are beckoning others to join the pancake breakfast, but very few go in.

Conclusions: Now, I present these two examples to neither praise nor condemn either practice. Both styles are intended to build a good Christian. What I do hope I showed is the importance of understanding what one is getting into. A fundamental and radical difference between the two is the culminating point for each of their faiths and practices. For the Protestant, baptism is the culminating point. For Catholics, it is the mass service. Understanding this key difference can go a long way into why things are the way they are in each type of church.

For the Protestant, attending church is the beginning of one's spiritual life. For the Catholic, mass is the ultimate expression of one's spiritual life. So while the Protestant service is geared towards welcoming new people in and giving them a reason to want to come back, Catholic service is characterized by solemnity born of a lifetime of devotion. Protestants bring Jesus into their service as a friend ("Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men," Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17). Catholics come to mass to see Jesus as the Lord and King ("Every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall give praise to God," Romans 14:11, inspired by Isaiah 45:23-25). Both service styles, therefore, are appropriate for what each one expects to find at church. But while a Catholic will likely view a Protestant service as a bit chaotic, and to some degree irreverent, he is still likely to have an agreeable experience. The poor Protestant, however, will not understand much of what is going on unless informed, and it is just not possible to fully explain everything as you go along because, despite the apparent slow pace, there are actually a surprising number of things going on all at once.

For the Protestant, once one becomes a regular at a church, he will be asked about baptism. At this point, things become more personal. After baptism, he is considered a full member of the church. But baptized or not, he is expected to help evangelize and bring others to the faith. Like I said, the Protestant service is just the beginning. The beginning for Catholics, however, starts with education. Either children are made to attend, or adults choose to attend, this education. There are several key steps along the way: baptism, confession, communion, and finally confirmation. By this time, the history, teachings, symbolism, and practices of the Church have been taught, and the full richness of the mass can be understood and appreciated in the solemnity of the service. Like his Protestant brethren, he is now considered a full member of the church. He is considered to have all the tools necessary to teach the faith.

But just because it takes months or years of training and a lifetime commitment to fully appreciate the Catholic mass, it does not follow that a Catholic should not bring a non-Catholic to mass, especially for a Catholic who has completed confirmation. But understand that the Protestant needs a little instruction to understand what is going on. The observations I brought out above are good ones to address ahead of time (and giving the answers is a good way to refresh on what one believes). While a full understanding is not possible in the first visit, there is a beauty and profoundly majestic experience at mass that this friend may appreciate if he is not distracted by the strange behavior. Indeed, this godly beauty (which can be expressed in many different ways) is a leading cause of conversion to the Catholic faith.

And for my final comment, just because Catholic mass is not the place to make new friends, there are plenty of activities most Catholic churches have where one does not need to be a Catholic to participate. They include choir, youth groups covering middle school through high school, focus groups for college kids, young adults' groups, Bible study, Pray for Life activities, potlucks, international food festivals, dances, yard sales, prison ministries, several groups to help care for the poor and homeless, and more. There are also educational activities available for those who want to know more about the faith, which do not require any commitment by the non-Catholic. These are all great ways to have a non-Catholic feel welcomed by the Catholic community and not feel so much a

stranger. Of course, the larger the church, the more activities exist. Contact the parish for details on what is available, and if nothing in this parish appeals to one, they are likely to be helpful in directing one to a nearby parish that does have something of interest.

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Original Publication Date: 24 August 2023