

## *DRESS AT MASS*

A small pamphlet lists a golf course's dress code clearly. On the course: "Men must wear shirts with a collar or turtleneck shirts. All shirts must be tucked in. All hats must be worn with the brim forward and outdoors only." In the country club dining room: "Jacket and tie are required for gentlemen aged 17 and over at all times. Ladies must wear a dress, skirt, or slacks." And no matter where you are "Jeans, denim, and sweat clothes are not tolerated anywhere on the property." Does this seem harsh? Do we look down on the country club's rules? Do we worry about the need for the members and their guests to be comfortable whether on the course or sitting at a table? Should the club's owner just be happy that people are coming? Probably not; most likely people appreciate the atmosphere that is created when people are dressed up. They might even look forward to dressing up for dinner at the country club, as a fancy night out.

Can you imagine what would happen if we printed a similar card with guidelines of how to dress for Mass on Sunday? What if ushers enforced this "dress code" as diligently as the country club enforces their rules for dress? What sort of letters would we receive at the parish office? How many telephone calls would the Bishop's office receive? What happens to our desire to dress up when it comes to Sunday Mass? Why is it that the only times we will dress a little nicer when going to church is for a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral? Sadly, it seems that the reasons people find to dress up on the Lord's Day have more to do with where we are going after Mass than our attendance at Mass itself. Perhaps our understanding of what truly takes place at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has diminished in past years. So, like any good gardener, rather than simply pulling the weed out — let us attack the root.

So just what happens at Mass? Suppose an alien was to land on the church's front lawn on a Saturday evening or Sunday morning and wander into the building to look around. In making his report home, he would perhaps think this gathering an opportunity to come together to exchange local gossip, read funny stories, and be entertained for forty-five minutes (less if you arrive late and leave early, but that is a whole other article). Whole books have been written on the topic of understanding the Mass, so how can we keep it "short and sweet"? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives a deep yet profoundly deep description on paragraph 1382:

The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's Body and Blood. But the celebration, the Eucharistic sacrifice, is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who offered himself for us.

Moreover, the Catechism recognizes the need for outward signs of our inward understanding of just what is happening at Mass. "Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest." (CCC #1387) Jesus Christ himself, not a symbol, not a reminder, but the man himself, becomes substantially present in the Eucharistic host. Each time we receive Communion, our hearts should be echoing the words of the Apostle John as he recognized the risen Christ on the seashore: "It is the Lord!" Truly it is the Lord who comes to dwell within us; how can that moment cause anything but an attitude of reverence and awe? A nineteenth-century Anglican clergyman, Gerard Moultrie, once translated a Byzantine liturgical hymn from the 400s which was sung during the Diving Liturgy at the presentation of the gifts. In what could be called a musician/ecumenical move, he combined the words of a Byzantine-rite hymn with the music of a Latin-rite hymn, and we are forever indebted to him for this powerful anthem. Fr. George Rutler, writing in his 1998 work, *Brightest and Best--Stories of Hymns* (available from Ignatius Press), calls this hymn "a sublime antidote to the lamentable musical trivia that has so mutilated the psychology of Catholic worship as it is ordinarily encountered." This truly is the mystery of faith:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
And with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly minded,  
For with blessing in His hand  
Christ our God to earth descended,  
Our full homage to demand.*

*King of Kings yet born of Mary,  
As of old on earth He stood,  
Lord of Lords in human vesture,  
In the body and the blood:  
He will give to all the faithful  
His own self for heavenly food.*

*At his feet the six-winged seraph;  
Cherubim with sleepless eye,  
Veil their faces to the presence,  
As with ceaseless voice they cry,  
"Alleluia, alleluia,  
Alleluia, Lord most high."*

Now that we have a basic understanding of the Eucharistic sacrifice, let us explore our understanding of the Lord's Day, known as the Sabbath (from the Hebrew "Sabbat"). The tradition comes to us from the very beginning of Sacred Scripture: "And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done and rested on the seventh day . . . So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen.1:2-3). Centuries later it is clearly reaffirmed in the Law given to Moses: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or your sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exod. 19:8-11). What began as the Jewish commemoration of God's rest after creating the universe was adopted and transferred to Sunday from the very start of the Church. In 1998, Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* ("*Day of the Lord*"), in which beautifully explains the switch of days; "Because the Third Commandment depends upon the remembrance of God's saving works and because Christians saw the definitive time inaugurated by Christ as a new beginning, they made the first day after the Sabbath a festive day, for that was the day on which the Lord rose from the dead... In the light of this mystery, the meaning of the Old Testament precept concerning the Lord's Day is recovered, perfected, and fully revealed in the glory which shines on the face of the Risen Christ. We move from the "Sabbath" to the "first day after the Sabbath," from the seventh day to the first day: the *dies Domini* [day of the Lord] becomes the *dies Christi* [day of Christ]!" At this point let us note that this is by no means a uniquely "Catholic" understanding but extends to all Christian denominations. Even though we are a country that had its most basic roots grounded in the Protestant tradition, there are many terms which today seem of a bygone era to which Catholics could just as easily relate. If one spoke of "Sunday School", everyone understood this always meant religious instruction rather than math or reading. Putting on your "Sunday best", no matter what day of the week it really was, meant that you would wear what was normally reserved for the worship of God. What has happened to our reverence for this day? How many people remember to bring to the Sacrament of Reconciliation any sins against the Third Commandment, i.e., any unnecessary work done on the Lord's day? Does the crisis of dysfunctional families have anything to do with our dysfunctional relationship with God? Yes, financial burdens may require wage-earners to put in extra hours on weekends to better support their families. True, there are certain occupations (health care, for example) whose very nature requires constant coverage. But as followers of Jesus Christ, even though the circumstances may prevent us, no situations should take away our understanding of Sunday as a day dedicated to the Lord. " Even in our own difficult times," the Holy Father writes, "The identity of this day must be protected and above all must be lived in all depth."

Perhaps nothing has done more to diminish the uniqueness of Sunday as the now commonplace anticipated vigil Masses held in just about every parish on Saturday evenings. In the 1967 instruction from the Sacred Congregation of Rites entitled *On the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, it is mentioned that with the permission from Rome for vigil Masses comes the instruction that "Pastors should explain the meaning of this permission carefully to the faithful and should ensure that the significance of Sunday is not thereby obscured." Here we priests have dropped the ball a bit. In recent times many of the faithful have been conditioned to expect a Mass the night before a

liturgical solemnity, and in fact make it their regular practice to attend these anticipated Masses. How many families regularly attend the Saturday evening vigil Mass, not because of the impossibility of attending Mass on Sunday, but because "We like to sleep in late," or "We don't do Sundays"? This is especially sad when the Church seeks to honor specific days such as August 15, or December 8, and so the liturgical moment is lost. Here mention must be made of the decision by the United States Bishops' Conference that removes the obligation of the faithful to attend Mass if the Solemnity falls on a Saturday or Monday. What message are we sending out but "No one should have to go to Mass two days in a row." The Church sanctifies time in her feasts and seasons precisely to focus attention on a specific person or event in salvation history; giving options outside the point in time, if not properly explained, waters down the moment. In the parish I am assigned to, Christmas Eve Masses outnumber Christmas Day Masses, largely because people want the obligation out of the way, in order to concentrate on the festivities. Sometimes though you have to laugh: In my first year as a priest, I received a phone call from a woman who very seriously asked whether we would be distributing ashes for Ash Wednesday on Tuesday evening? We must remember that not only the "big feasts" of the Church calendar carry the weight of a Solemnity, but each and every Sunday of the year!

Continuing this line of thought, it should be stated that Sunday is the Lord's day, even while we are on vacation! In my home state of New Jersey, we are blessed with miles of beautiful seashore, but in this case the physical features are irrelevant. Many people have come to feel that summer allows us to treat our Mass attendance with a certain lack of concern. In many shore parishes from June through September, people can be seen attending Mass wearing clothes that would fit in just as well (and even more appropriately) on the beach. The sad part is that most people do, in fact, have a dress or blazer packed in their suitcases, but these are for "special occasions." Good Lord, if the Mass is not a special occasion, then what is? They will go to a restaurant where jackets are required and never question the dress code, yet place those same requirements on Mass attendance and they suddenly become irritated. Some priests, fearing that correcting the faithful may result in a lower collection quietly let it go unmentioned. Even worse are the horror stories of priests saying such things as "It's too hot to say the Creed" or neglecting such vestments as the chasuble. Recently I was told of a parishioner's friend's visit from California. She spent a good deal of time pressing the pleats in her skirt, not to wear for Mass, but for the brunch she was going to attend after Mass (she planned to go home to change clothes in between). When the parishioner questioned her about not dressing up for Mass, she was told, "They (meaning the priests, I imagine) should be happy we come." Speaking for my brother priests, I say that you should never come to Mass to impress me or your neighbors, but because it is the worship owed to almighty God, and required by the precepts of the Church to which you profess to belong. There are 168 hours in the week, can we not give God at least one of those hours?

If we understood the awesomeness that is the Blessed Sacrament, and if we see that beauty of setting aside the day of Christ's resurrection as a day for the Lord, then suddenly the Sunday assembly of the faithful to celebrate the Eucharist makes perfect sense. Suddenly, the obligation the Church places on her faithful to attend Mass each Sunday bothers us as little as our daily obligation to breathe or eat or drink. If we hold our breath, a reflex action causes our bodies to gasp for air. If we go without food for an extended period, the unexplainable yet very real sensation of hunger arises. Similarly each week as we face the burdens of life, the temptations to sin, and perhaps our own shortcomings, something inside each of us should cause us to yearn, to gasp for the Mass. To gather together as our Christian ancestors have done for centuries, to give thanks and praise to God, to listen to the timeless words of Scripture, and to share Christ's body in Holy Communion, we become the newest link in an unbroken chain which, if traced back, leads to none other than Jesus Christ himself! How do we react to this? Do our exterior actions show the feelings we have inside? Do we learn from the different postures the Church calls for at Mass? When we stand, do we see ourselves as standing in the presence of Almighty God, as we would stand in the presence of royalty or the President of the United States? When we kneel, do we realize it is with humility that we show our nothingness in the real presence of Christ? I have been blessed in my lifetime to get close to both Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa in their moments of silent prayer before the tabernacle. To see true holiness incarnate bent over in humble supplication only reinforces Christ's words: "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:26). Recently a Catholic church, after completing some renovations to "get with the times", took out all the kneelers from the pews. A woman complained about it and was told that standing was a sign of respect, just as people stand when the President walks into a room. "You're right,"

she said," I would stand for the President, but I kneel for Jesus Christ."

All this brings us to the question at hand: proper dress for Mass. On the surface, it has no effect whether the congregation is dressed in togas, tunics, or tanktops; Christ still becomes truly present in the Eucharistic species by the words and action of the priest. This is equally true in other circumstances as well. A couple will be validly married by a priest or deacon whether we attend the wedding in a tuxedo or a bathing suit. A baby will be validly baptized whether we attend the baptism in a dress or in pajamas. Our children will receive their first Holy Communion whether we wear something formal or something frumpy. In short, we do not wear the clothes to make the magic happen; we wear the clothes to salute the honored guest(s); to show we care about them and that they mean something very special to us. So the million-dollar question must then be asked: "At a Mass, who is the guest we come to honor?" It is none other than Jesus Christ. If we will dress up to honor ordinary people receiving the Sacraments, then how can we not dress up to honor the author of those Sacraments?

Here we must avoid the other extreme. If we are dressing to honor Christ, then we are dressing for Him alone, and not to be seen by others. Naturally not everyone has the some financial means, and so "dressing up" becomes a relative term. Quite simply, we should dress in a respectful and perhaps even slightly subdued manner, wearing the best we have for God. Mass should never become a fashion show in which we spend our time looking around and judging the best outfit! Nor should we plan our wardrobe based on what others will think. At its very root, our external demeanor is a personal salute between us and the Lord, and no one else should enter into the formula.

Yet there is another reason for dressing respectfully at Mass. As adults, even if we are not feeling as we should, we are able to "put on a good face". If we come to Mass dressed shabbily, we may still have the deepest devotion interiorly. Children, however, are not able to differentiate between the two. They look at a picture of a monster and it is as real to them as if it were a living being. What they see on the outside they assume is also on the inside, and therein lies the teaching moment. A child may not understand the word "Transubstantiation," nor could he explain the theology of the Eucharist. Nevertheless, if he sees his parents dressing up for Mass in the same way they dress for weddings, birthdays, and other big events, he will understand that going to Mass is a special event too. Recently comedienne Carol Burnett was explaining a time when her three daughters were quite young, and the family would be going to a rather fancy restaurant for dinner. Visions of food fights, spilled drinks, and public screaming filled her head. Rather than cancel the dinner, she decided to put her acting skills to work. Outside her bathroom she hung a sign: "Total Beauty Make Over, 2 cents." As each timid child made her way into the bathroom, Carol acted as her personal beautician, asking the girl if she wanted her hair done this way or that way, and if she would like to wear this dress or that dress to the dinner party. That night, without any coaching from their mother, each of her three little girls acted like absolute angels, saying such things as "Please, pass the butter" and "No, thank you." But dressing them a certain way the children instinctively knew what behavior would fit. How this could change the character of Sunday Mass, where children's silence is often bought rather than taught!

The Church sees parents as the primary educators of their children in matters of the faith, Pope John Paul writes: "For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and 'ministry' as 'domestic churches,' when parents share with their children at the one Table of the Word and of the Bread of Life." If they learn that Mass is some legalistic minimum, something we must do to get it over with, where stepping in the door is enough, and attendance is measured by possession of a communion Host and a bulletin, then I fear what these children will pass on to their children. But if we begin with ourselves, and create an attitude which teaches children about the worship of God in a way that prepares them for intellectual growth later on, then we will not be the last link in the chain, but a proud link somewhere in the middle.

In the end, the country club's printed dress code seems absurd. The truth is we should not need any piece of paper to tell us what is appropriate to wear to Mass. Mass is not some foreign thing in a strange place; it is a "family reunion" on our home turf. We know what happens at every Mass, and we know how God wants us to spend His day. How we dress should be obvious.