

PENTECOST SUNDAY

June 5, 2022

I.

It can be easier to notice trends in a culture different from our own.

An illustration.

A friend of mine took a trip to Portugal last week.

He texted me from Lisbon to say that he was in an Uber car and heard the Angelus over the radio.

(The Angelus is the prayer to Mary traditionally prayed three times daily: 6:00 a.m., 12:00 N, and 6:00 p.m.)

I remember, in 2011, driving around Ireland and also hearing the Angelus on the radio.

So, here is a vestige of cultural Catholicism:

The Angelus is still broadcast on the radio, but very few Portuguese, or Irish, attend Mass.

Portugal is 80 percent nominally Catholic, but only 20 percent go to Mass.

As my friend pointed out in his text message to me, the Uber driver didn't participate in praying the Angelus.

This incident also underscores the need for a New Evangelization: at swaths of people in historically Catholic areas no longer practice the faith.

That trend, already far advanced in Europe, has crossed the Atlantic.

I believe that this is now the reality in the United States, having been accelerated and exacerbated by the pandemic.

I believe it's also the reality in this parish: the future is here.

II.

Mass attendance here at the Cathedral is only half of what it was before Covid.

Since everything reopened—
that was a year ago—
only about 600 people attend Mass here on the weekend.

The church seats 800 people.

Just look at how many empty seats there are in the church!

Numbers are likewise down with regard to religious education,
First Holy Communion, and Confirmation.

Other parishes are experiencing a similar decline—more or less—
as are other Christian denominations.

The statistics tell us that something has changed.

During the height of the pandemic,
it was thought and hoped that hunger for the Eucharist
would bring everyone back—but it hasn't.

It was thought and hoped that, once we could sing again at Mass,
that would bring everyone back—but it hasn't.

It was thought and hoped that the experience of community
would bring everyone back—but it hasn't.

It was thought and hoped that that the reimposition of the Sunday obligation
would bring everyone back—but it hasn't.

It was thought that when the Covid vaccine became widely available,
that would bring everyone back—but it hasn't.

Maybe each of these items has helped in some way,
but many people have not yet returned to church.

It's thought that perhaps livestreaming is the problem,
having become a substitute for in-person attendance Mass—
but, on average, only 15 people watch the livestreamed Mass on Sundays.

And yet, when I go to buy toothpaste at Target, the store is jammed.

Restaurants are doing well.

It's expected to be a busy summer travel season.

The commercials on TV tell us that everyone wants to get together
with their friends for a backyard barbecue.

We're now in summer,
when Mass attendance usually declines anyway.

And the sociological studies show that the longer people are away,
the harder it is for them to come back.

Is it reasonable and realistic to expect that those who are not here
will return on their own,
when they haven't already?

The decline in religious practice is part of a larger malaise in society:
my sense is that people's lives are not yet back to normal.

And with respect to religious practice,
there are other contributing factors at work:
an aggressively secular culture that is increasingly hostile to religion,
and the sexual abuse crisis,
which has hurt victims and damaged the Church's credibility.

But, more recently,
I think we have to admit that other things
have taken the place of God in people's lives.

Without passing judgment or casting aspersions,
many Catholics evidently don't understand or value the Eucharist.

If they did, they would be here,
because that is what we offer the world—
something no one else can:
the presence of Jesus Christ.

III.

That's where you come in.

You are here, and I am grateful for your witness.

You have a pivotal role to play.

Today is the feast of Pentecost:
the commemoration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,
which empowers the Church to give witness to the death and resurrection of Christ
for the forgiveness of sins.

The decline in religious practice is painful to admit,
especially for a priest.

I'm addressing this issue because our task is urgent,
not because our endeavor is futile.

It's our role—
especially, you, the lay faithful—
to help bring back those who are away.

No one else will do it.

This is precisely the New Evangelization:
to reach out to those among us who are not practicing.

There's a tendency to look for an institutional solution to the problem.

What is Pope Francis doing about this? Bishop Knestout? Fr. Tony?

But evangelization is the work of the entire community, not just the hierarchy.

In fact, you the lay faithful, are the tip of the Church's missionary "spear."

My role, as a priest, is to serve you,
so that you can evangelize the world.

You can go to places where I can't;
You can reach people I cannot.

There's also a temptation to look for a technical fix to the problem.

But let me be honest:

Emails, social media posts, and phone calls will not bring people back.

We've already tried that.

What will bring people back is you.

Evangelization must be personal for it to be effective.

It will happen one encounter at a time,
over a period of time.

So, I want to ask you to do something:
reach out to one person you know who is away from Church.

Pray for the person.

Genuinely ask how the person is doing.

Listen attentively to the person's concerns.

Without passing judgment, or guilt-tripping, or browbeating,
invite the person to attend Mass—with you.

As the opportunity presents itself,
give witness to your faith,
and explain the significance of the Eucharist,
which is Christ himself.

If the person's answer to attending Mass is "no," let it go.

You can always try again later.

Relationships of genuine concern are essential to helping people return to Mass.

IV.

The future is here,
but the outcome has not been decided.

The numbers tell us what's happening.

But our concern is ultimately with people, not with statistics.

This is a long-term project.

We need to change our way of thinking
and we need to get moving.

Our task is to put people in touch with Jesus Christ;
he is the Savior.

Christ gives us his own life in the sacraments.

To be in communion with Christ, to experience his love,
is a beautiful way to live.

The Church understands the Holy Spirit
to be the very love between Christ and his Father.

It is a love so powerful that it overflows as another divine Person.

That Spirit is poured out upon the Church,
in order to change the world.

That change begins here, with each of us.