

Traveling Companion: View from the pew

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Priests are expected to celebrate Mass, not attend Mass. So often we, as priests, do not get a perspective of what it is like to view a celebration of Mass from the pews. During my vacation this past summer, I decided to try such an experience.

I went to a nearby parish with some members of my family to attend a Saturday evening Mass. We arrived a few minutes earlier, took our seats about halfway down the church; knelt for a few moments to gather our thoughts and prepare for Mass.

A few moments later, a middle-aged couple gave a half-genuflection in front of my seat. We moved in to make room for them. I had observed as a celebrant that people usually claim the very outside of the pew and anyone who wants to go into the pew usually has to climb over them, often creating embarrassment. The middle aged lady knelt beside me and, from the corner of my eye, I could sense she was checking me out, realizing that I was not a regular churchgoer there. She then proceeded to cast glances around the church, looking for familiar faces and trying to get a mental picture of who was attending that particular Mass.

Soon, the organist began playing without announcing a hymn or having a song leader. The hymn was a familiar one – “Faith of our Father.” The distinctive voice of the lady organist rose above any others. A few people voice could be heard, as they rattled off the familiar song.

Shortly afterwards, the priest and altar servers processed down the aisle. At the end of Mass, he indicated that he was new in the area. He was sixty-eight years old, was a Salesian Father who spend most of his priesthood in Tanzania and now had returned to Ireland in retirement, but continued to work and minister among the people in the local town.

He began Mass in the Irish language and soon reverted to the vernacular English language. The readings proceeded in the usual manner, followed by the homily. I had listened to homilies by bishops and priests many times as a concelebrant, but this time, I listened to the homily like any lay person sitting in the pew. The homily itself was a mixture of disconnected ideas that the priest tried to connect. Passing reference was alluded to the story in the gospel but there was no reference to the other two readings. I noticed the reaction of people in the pew as they got restless as the priest went on. I, too, experienced the same. When the priest finished the homily, there was a collective sigh of relief.

Sitting through the homily, I got a new appreciation of the endurance level of people who have to listen to our homilies every weekend. It made me more conscious of the need for thorough preparation of my homilies and the need to speak to the needs of people in the pew. It also made me realize that the Holy Spirit needs my cooperation and hard work in order for the homily to touch people’s lives.

As Mass continued, my six-year old niece turned to her father and said, “This is boring,” as she alternated sitting beside her father and mother.

Communion time arrived and people began to exit their seats to receive Communion. Some stayed in their seats. I realized that some people do not or cannot for various reasons receive Communion. They endure the embarrassment of watching others go to Communion and struggle with their own cross or inability to receive Communion.

On returning from Communion, my niece whispered in my ear, “What does it taste like?” In anticipation her own First Communion next year, her obvious question did not have an obvious answer. I attempted to answer it but fell short in my response. Finally, I told her that I would show her later as I planned to give her an unconsecrated host to taste. She seemed satisfied, but, moments later, she whispered again, “How long more?” I told her, “five minutes” and she seemed satisfied.

As Mass ended, I left with a new insight and appreciation of what a view from the pew is really like.