

# I'm Bored at Mass

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This is a "different" pamphlet in several ways. Its style is simple, frank and conversational. For all its simplicity, it throws a bright light on many aspects of the Mass which may well be dark and distressful - especially to the impatience of youth. So it is well worth reading, and re-reading. -The Editor.

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## A TIME FOR HONESTY

This pamphlet is addressed to the young, and the not so young; to all those in fact, who find boredom at Mass an increasing problem. Whether stated straight out in so many words, or hinted at by means of complaint, it is true that one finds increasingly alarming the attitude "I'm bored at Mass". It seemed to many priests, and to some laymen, that with the advent of the English Mass, the boredom of former days would vanish, or at least decline. But this does not seem to be the case. Sometimes it would seem that the boredom is greater than ever.

In recent years the revolt against authority, and all form of the establishment has grown at a rate unprecedented in the history of man, though it has at times and in certain places taken a more subtle turn than the revolt of former times. The authority and the establishment of the Church has been no exception. In fact, it has been the case that we find there is far more intolerance of authority in the Church, and of its established customs and practices than there is in many of the institutions of the world in which we live and work.

The treatment of this topic will include various related objections, and attempts to face up to these, and present another possible view. The position and teaching of the Church will not be watered down in any way; on the contrary, every effort will be made to show the beauty and very real meaning contained for us in the mysteries of the central feature of our life as Catholic Christians: The Mass.

"I'm Bored at Mass"

One of the first things to be noted here, is that boredom, or tedium, which is another word used to describe it in the dictionary, is very much part of an unbridled humanity. Unbridled most of all, in the freedom that has come to it through the advancements of this technological age. There has been an element of this in man ever since the fall, but our ancestors were generally creative people, whereas the man of today is creative, for the most part, in an elitist sense.

So much is handed to us on a plate today, and in many cases the need for the plate has even disappeared with the coming of the disposable food-pack. Together with the liberation of which Alvin Tofler speaks in "Future Shock" there has at the same time come an insidious slavery to the very machinery of technology which makes that freedom possible. Thus we find many people try to erase boredom by turning the switch of the TV set, or seeking the company of the poker machine,

and turning to even more frightening occupations and projects, till some of them end up with the worst cure of all: addiction to drugs. At least it has been for them one way of alleviating the boredom of a life that seems empty, a life where the world of advanced technology, computer, disposable cups, meals and dresses has finally failed to satisfy. For the man of today, "sameness" is a notion that is becoming more and more foreign. Change is all round, and with it novelty, and the excitement that comes with it.

In a strange way, man has always tended to seek that which is novel and exciting before seeking the stable and unexciting. There is no intention here of denying our possession of free will and discipline. Indeed, it is in this manner that we have, to date, controlled these tendencies in ourselves. They are harder to control today than they were in the day of our fathers and grandfathers, because the pressures of change and of that which is novel are far greater in our time than they were in their time.

In the light of what has been said above, it must be admitted that the person coming to Mass these days comes at a greater disadvantage psychologically than did Mass-goers of former times. So we have established the fact that there are very good reasons psychologically for a predisposition of boredom, from the very moment our Christian enters the Church. Perhaps the recognition of this fact can in itself be a help in overcoming the problem, and giving the Mass a positive content rather than a negative one. Right! Now what do we do about it? Well, we might as well start with some of the objections raised, and reasons given for boredom.

"It's the way the Mass is performed - it means nothing to me."

This objection contains far more truth than might at first sight appear. The Mass is in very truth a performance. It is the performance of a drama: the greatest drama ever presented to mankind. It is of course far more than ordinary drama; it presents reality to us. But we speak of that in more detail later on. On the point of the Mass as a drama, it is reasonable for us to note that in the presentation of any drama in history different actors will give a different interpretation of the text; they will present the message in different ways. Thus a Laurence Olivier will present Shakespeare differently from the way Richard Burton would do it. And Richard Harris will give yet another presentation again. Yet it is assumed all the while that the audience will have the good common sense to realize that the original message of Shakespeare remains unchanged. The content of the play is not dependent on the actor and his interpretation. His interpretation may help to make it more vivid for us; but if we know basically what the play is about then the message will not evade us.

It is very much the same in the case of the Mass where we have the priest "performing" - each one according to his particular personality and gifts; some making it more meaningful and vivid to us than others; some able to transfer their own devotion and conviction more persuasively than others. Not all priests will be of the calibre of an Olivier or a Richard Burton. But all the priests are commissioned to act out, or perform the sacred mystery, or drama, which we call the Mass.

### Christ's Part

It is well for us to keep in mind that during the Mass each priest is identified with Christ, the eternal High Priest, who is really the author and "presenter" of the drama. In the Mass the events of the "there and then" are made present to us in the "here and now", by the power of Christ. Because of this, there is demanded of the faithful participating at Mass a far greater effort than would be the case in an ordinary drama, where the effect will depend largely on the talents of the leading actor or actors. The Mass does not benefit us because "Father A" says it, and he is "holy", but because Christ

has appointed "Father A" to be a dispenser of his great mystery. This man has been chosen to "perform" this action together with Christ.

"I don't get anything out of it."

Fair enough. Most of us don't get much as far as we can readily see. We like to be able to see results, to see how things are going, to observe our progress or decline. Okay, we are not going to have that given to us, so we are met with an inevitable. Or is that as far as it goes? Might we not examine the matter of our attitudes, and see if there is anything positive that can come out of this?

It is important first of all, for us to realize that strictly speaking, in order of priorities, it is not we who are supposed to get anything out of it but God, strange as that may seem. Not that he has need of anything that we can give him, but he does demand our homage. This comes through again and again in the scriptures. The main purpose of our going to Mass should be therefore, not one of seeing how much we can get out of it, or even going because it is the law of the Church that we must go at least on Sundays, but rather that of going to Mass to give homage to God; going to do him honour, to give him praise, to adore him as the Supreme Being.

In other words it should be our effort to pay him a compliment, and to thank him for all he has given to us, at the same time knowing that it is the means of greater union with him. It is certainly lawful, and even good, for us to go to Mass with petitions in mind for ourselves, but God should get first place.

#### A Community Celebration

There is here the further aspect of the Mass as a community celebration, and if viewed from this point of view it might become clear to us that even though we may not feel that we are getting anything out of it, the person next to us might be getting something out of our presence with him at the celebration. Our effort to be attentive might be all that is needed to give that extra little bit of help to a person who is floundering. On the other hand, by our presence, we may draw strength from others at Mass, who have managed to appreciate more of its meaning than we do. This community awareness and mutual help and strengthening was very much alive in the Hippy Commune and Protest March. The element of keeping at it, or perseverance comes into it here. There might well be times when we will get something out of it - maybe even a lot. But to go to Mass in that frame of mind is to head for frustration by approaching it from the wrong angle.

"All that ritual is irrelevant."

All that ritual is certainly unusual, and it is certainly strange, and at times, puzzling. But is it all that irrelevant? Undoubtedly if looked at superficially it will seem that to some, and perhaps even to many. But are we prepared to go on living a superficial life?

The anthropologists would not consider it irrelevant, because they know from the pattern of human behaviour throughout the ages that man has a need for ritualistic celebrations when he tries to communicate with his deity and his fellowman. Man yearns for this in all ages and stages, from the most primitive tribal forms of worship to the High-priests of Hippydom and the Rock-festival sub-culture. The pseudo-sophisticate may throw aside all preceding forms of ritual, but if we look hard enough we will see that his humanity has managed to substitute some other form of ritual, whether it be that of the court manners or the fashion parade. The need is basic to man. It could be argued here that this form of ritual is out of date, and that certainly is one argument that can set us back a pace or two, and sometimes catch us out for an answer.

On the other hand, keeping to the point of the basic needs in man, we will see, if we take the time and trouble that our ritual in the Mass does in fact consist of elements which relate to those needs and qualities most basic to us as human beings.

Great use is made of words, by which we communicate in the ordinary pattern of life; of signs and symbols, of bodily postures, by which we express our innermost feelings and desires, of place, which separates this event, this celebration from the ordinary pattern of life, much in the same way as we celebrate a wedding or birthday in a place set apart. This celebration happens to be a sacred one. The language is not completely known to us, because it consists of a mixture of the known and unknown. It deals with a mystery. But a mystery is not something about which we can know nothing; it is something about which we cannot know everything.

"It should be part of everyday life."

This is a very common difficulty, and in the life-situation of our times we must face up to it, and admit that there is something in it. We cannot afford to dismiss it lightly, as scatterbrained rambling. There are people who do seriously believe that the Mass is not sufficiently related to everyday life, and that the vestments used are part of a bygone era, the sacred vessels belong to the bourgeois class of society, and have little relation to the use and needs of the working class and the poor. Why do we not use a wine glass for a chalice instead of a cup made from precious metal, which is more than likely what Christ would have done?

I am afraid it is at this point that we part company: to begin with, in all probability, Christ did use a cup of special precious metal, because the Last Supper, even in its beginnings that night was a very special event in the year for the Jews. It was the most sacred event in the year, and it is surely reasonable to assume that in each and every household where the Pasch was celebrated, the very best cup would be used for the celebration of this sacred meal.

Furthermore, to carry it back to our own situation and our own time. we find that from the anthropological point of view, the evidence is the other way round yet again. Whenever it is a matter of sacred celebration mankind seeks to give only the best. This applies whatever the class or social strata taking part in the celebration. In the history of man it has been found, and is still found that even the very poor will make great sacrifices to provide the best they can for a sacred celebration. And this very fact of itself, should lead us to the really basic point, and that is that the Mass is not supposed to be simply a part of everyday life. It is the SACRED EVENT PAR EXCELLENCE, the time set apart from the mundane activities of life and devoted to God. Should we not have the courage as Christian Catholics to face up to this?

Certainly we take the worries and cares of our everyday life to the Mass. But we take them there to lift them to the higher level, and ourselves with them. Why is it that we have to bring the sacred down to our level, instead of making the effort to raise ourselves to the higher level of the Master?

It is a time set apart for Divine worship. Because of this, the vestments used and the vessels used are there to remind us that this is a sacred act. The priest does not say Mass in a lounge suit because that is the dress of the businessman in his daily round of life, and the priest is not a businessman; he is a priest of God.

He is not performing an act of the daily round of life, he is performing a sacred act, and these are human ways of expressing this. Again, even the most primitive tribes, and the hippies have distinctive forms of dress for those set apart as the High-priests.

## SUCH HYPOCRISY!

"But I feel such a hypocrite being at Mass."

For many really well-intentioned people with sensitive consciences, this feeling can be a real problem. They see so clearly the need for goodness, and the high standards demanded by the life of a Catholic Christian as presented to them. Some people in fact honestly believe that because of their failures, large and small, they are hypocritical if they then front up for Mass.

Others of course, find this a convenient excuse for not going to Mass, for not allowing themselves to be confronted with the source of goodness who might challenge them to change their way of life, and they see attendance at Mass as a threat.

With regard to the first class of people it must be stated that Our Lord Himself made it very clear that he came not to call the just but sinners. If we really believe that he is Love then we will not really be afraid to take our sinfulness to him because we will know that he will be received with loving forgiveness. One has only to look at the parable of the prodigal son, or to take up one of the many instances in the Gospels where he gave forgiveness to the woman taken in adultery, to Magdalen, to Peter after his denial, to see that he is not a harsh God, but a God who is there ever-reaching out to us, in fact, with loving kindness.

The second class fall largely into the category of Augustine, when he prayed to be converted "but not just yet". At Mass there is an honest confrontation with the God who made us out of love, and keeps us going out of love, and seeks our love in return!

"I'd feel a bigger hypocrite if I went to Holy Communion."

This is another objection sometimes raised by those who are having difficulties of faith or who are confused about life, about where they are going and where they might end.

We cannot dismiss this as pure drivel; but on the other hand it must be pointed out that this rationalization is not really very rational. We may not be able to see the point of the Eucharist clearly; it may all seem confusion, and it may seem this to the point of hypocrisy if we receive. But total understanding is not demanded of us in the reception of the Eucharist. Total understanding is not given to us, either priest or people. Faith is believing beyond understanding and the evidence it can provide. It is in the last analysis reliance on the Master and his love.

This cannot come from any amount of reading alone. It will come most of all from a loving friendship with him. No doubt Mary Magdalen felt a hypocrite at times, and so did Peter, but they did not let their will be guided by their feelings. They KNEW that their Master loved them. We have to be satisfied with much the same kind of response.

Now, if you were to feel a hypocrite if you went to Holy Communion because there is some mortal sin on your soul, then, of course you must seek forgiveness from our loving Master and go to Confession.

"I'd feel a hypocrite if I went to Confession."

This objection is closely related to the preceding one, though it gives even less credit to the words of Christ and the teaching of the Church than the other. Nevertheless, for the person with a sensitive conscience, and habitual sin, it can be a very real problem.

The solution, as far as one can be found, is again, in the effort to rely on the words of Christ and his Church, and to keep in mind that he came to heal the sinner. It is important to remember that sanctity is achieved in the constant effort to be good. The struggle is life-long, and not without failure for any one of us. If we choose to stay away from the sacraments because of our own sinfulness then we are giving neither ourselves nor God a fair chance of remedying the situation, and we are certainly placing limits to his mercy. The psalm tells us "His great love is without end!" In the sacrament of penance we speak to him as to a faithful friend who loves us and will take us back no matter how often we fail and we come with the frailty of our humanity to the one who chose to share that humanity with us.

On the purely natural level, it is fact that confession is good for the soul. It is a need of humanity. In the sacrament of Penance however, there is the added advantage, not only of an assured secrecy, but also of the fact that we are confessing through the priest, to the God who made us, and who can heal us. Here we find the strength to carry on. It may not all be very clear, but surely it is worth trying.

"I think the Church is full of hypocrites anyway."

That may well be so, but you do not have to judge them, God does. As a matter of fact, more to the point, God alone has the right to judge them. The persons you judge to be the biggest hypocrites in the Church may be going through a terrible struggle in their souls known only to God and their confessor, and shared with them alone.

By what authority do you judge them? Certainly their behaviour through the week may be inconsistent with their attendance at Mass on Sunday or each morning, but God alone is the searcher of the heart and mind, and he will be their judge. And even if they are deluding themselves into thinking that they are living the Christian life, and it is perfectly obvious to you that they are not, then it might be that by their attendance at Mass they will be eventually led to see the path they should follow to be a true Christian. What chance would they have of finding this apart from Christ, whose name they bear?

Undoubtedly there will be times when it will be hard for us not to be scandalized at the behaviour of some of our brethren. But the Master told us "Blessed is the man who is not scandalized in me".

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## INTO THE ACTION

"It's all just like a foreign language and meaningless formulas - I want something that has meaning for me now."

This is fair enough as far as it goes, but does it go far enough? On closer examination it can be seen that the Mass has a lot to say to ALL generations, the "now" generation included. There are certainly going to be elements in the Mass that will have more meaning for one group than for another, but again we should remember that it speaks to us in the language of what we have in common: our humanity. We must let the Mass speak to people of other generations and age groups. It does this by speaking to man as man. The Mass speaks to the basic man, the essential man, and in so doing speaks the universal language of mankind.

The Mass speaks through the language of movement, posture, procession, song and symbol, through the language of petition and thanksgiving and rejoicing. These methods are not really so far removed from those used by people engaged in protest movements, moratorium marches and

political demonstrations. When a draft resister burnt his draft card then we knew that he is using a symbol (the burning, and in public) to show the world that his conscience (or his convenience, some would say - it does not really matter which here - it's still a symbol) tells him to act in this way.

The songs sung during Anti-Vietnam demonstrations told the feelings and hopes of the marchers; the placards they carried, and the way they move their bodies spoke either of peace or of violence. And so it goes on until we eventually end up with the peace sign that has become almost universally accepted.

It is in the same basic language that the Mass speaks to us. The symbol par excellence that we use at Mass is that of the Cross. But we do use others. The Alpha and Omega often found on our altars or in other prominent parts of the Church speak to us of Christ as the "beginning and the end, the first and the last".

It is a good thing here to remember that to the uninitiated the language spoken by the members of the street gang will have little meaning, no matter what their age, unless they have taken the care and trouble to study it. Just as foreign will be the jargon of hard-core pop folklore and the peculiar language of the drug addict. By language here, we mean not only words spoken, but signs and symbols used, signs and symbols which abound in these sub-cultures.

"What does it all mean anyway?"

Most of the other objections found in this pamphlet stem from this basic one of not understanding what it all means. How can we ever know and love someone if we never understand them, at least to some extent?

The Mass will only really mean something to us if we grow in understanding of the great mystery that is taking place before our eyes, and if we come slowly but increasingly to know that we are caught up in this and take part in it; that we are not meant to be mere bystanders. As we have said before, it is an established fact that the religious man, of, and at all times, approaches God through symbolic liturgical forms. So it would seem that sign and symbol is the only fully adequate HUMAN means by which man can express his relationship to God - to express it for himself, to clarify it for others and to bring about some kind of communal expression. It means basically that a meeting takes place: the meeting of God and man in a special event.

This event we can call the "Christ" event, when the being who founded time expresses Himself through and in time. It means that through the power of God the saving acts of Christ's life are made present to us, sacramentally.

It means that our humanity and our time are transformed by a superhuman power. Time has been brought to fulness, and it is this fulness that is made present and available to us through the saving power of Christ. With Christ the fulness of time came. The saving acts of the man-Jesus have a saving power because they are done by a Divine power (His Divinity) and because they are made visible in human form. They are sacramental. The signs and symbols are used because they are our means of communicating as humans. He understood this, and -became fully human, and used these human forms of communication.

By his saving power, the signs and symbols take on a new dimension - the dimension of making actual and present to us what they symbolize: the saving events of his life with us. The Body of Christ reveals the inner saving power of his acts, just as we can use our bodies to reveal our interior thoughts and aspirations. We do this by means of signs and symbols.

"What is really happening?"

To try to understand what is happening, we have to go back to the life of Christ as it has been lived out in history, and see the duality that is there. The whole process of being a man is one of becoming a man; and in Christ's life this process of becoming is found throughout his life, and therefore the Incarnation doesn't just end at Christmas, but is taken to its conclusion in His death, resurrection and exaltation at the right hand of the Father at the Ascension.

The Incarnation means that the eternal son of God has entered personally into the world of time, and that all the historic acts of the man-Jesus are personally acts of the eternal Son of God. If we go back to the first coming of Christ at the moment of the Incarnation we see that he chose to immerse himself totally in time as a human being - he became fully man, and thus subject in his humanity to time and space.

But because he at the same time remained always and everywhere the Eternal Son of God, there was about every human act or word of His an eternal element that was independent of time, that transcends time.

Thus all his acts on earth have a double dimension: they are historical and temporal; at the same time they transcend history and have a spiritual element. Given this we see that the mystery of the Cross and all the acts of Christ's life are eternally actual realities. Insofar as he was human, and bound by that humanity to the limits of space and time, his actions were also bound by these limits. Thus his actions did have an historical element. They did end at a certain point in time, and they were limited to a certain area of space.

But insofar as he was at the same time eternal, and insofar as his humanity and Divinity remain inseparable, these actions in time have about them an element that is independent of space and time. Thus, by his coming at the Incarnation, as we have spoken of it above, he eternalized time. He put into time an element that is timeless, an element that is therefore always present. Past and future can be spoken of only when we speak of time and history. When we speak of the eternal we must speak of the present. Eternity is the ever-present "now". At this point, which we can call the Mass, or any other of the sacraments, Christ is the conjunction of time and eternity.

This is why it is true to say, with the inadequacy of human language, that at the Mass, by the power of Christ, time stands still and eternity takes over, and takes us over. The events of there and then, the Last Supper and Calvary, are made present here and now by the saving power of Christ who is the founder of time.

If Christ is in time, the being who transcends time, all his actions are inserted into a human temporality; but instead of being absorbed by this temporality, they transcend it at every phase, because they are based on, and always opening out on, and all performed basically by an eternal "I" through a temporal "Me".

We repeat, there is in the historical saving acts of redemption an ever-present element, that cannot be done away with, because it does not depend on this world. It is eternal. By choosing to identify himself with the priest, who is His instrument, at Mass, and in the performance of all the other sacraments, Christ makes this eternally-actual reality present to us in the here and now.

The Calvary-sacrifice, in both its spiritual and bodily dimensions, has an eternal actuality. It is the instrument of the Divine will and is charged with divine saving Power. There is in the Mass then,

the quality of full freedom from the restrictive limitations of time and place, so that the events of Calvary are dynamically present to us here and now by Divine power.

The Mass is not merely a repetition of Calvary. Historically, Calvary is finished and can never be repeated; but it can be re-presented. And this is what happens here. The priest is the means used by Christ to bring about this representation, when he does so in communion with Christ and the Church. It can be summed up by saying that all the external acts of Christ, of the Church, and of the minister in the performance of the sacrament, are instruments which accomplish, manifest, and embody the Divine Saving Will.

What has been said here is strange and mysterious at first sight, but then again we are dealing with the greatest mystery that mankind will ever come face to face with, and this cannot be watered down. It is well worth while going back and reading over the preceding pages on the mystery of the Mass to try to understand a little more of what it means, because once we have grasped something of the meaning of this great mystery we find that we are left with a tremendous sense of the love of God, and of the care he has for us.

We are left with a sense of awe for what takes place at Mass, and of how we are caught up in the unfathomable mystery that is God; something that we could never really do adequately without his help. This explanation has been a theological one. It is deep; it is meant to be and it is meant to spark us to further thought and prayer about this the greatest event in the history of mankind.

With the appreciation of the great mystery that is before us, there comes also a greater appreciation of our dependence as creatures. It has been said that God's Divine presence is only fully real to man when man is aware of his own limitations. The Mass, more than any other act we can take part in, can lead us to this sense of awe and mystery and a knowledge of our own dependence, which in turn will lead to the greater realization of God's Divinity.

"Well, other people don't seem very enthusiastic."

This is all too true. Some people in fact are not very enthusiastic most of the time, and this is a course of scandal to many. But is that any excuse for your not being enthusiastic?

Enthusiasm is contagious; it is catching, and it has to be caught from someone. If everyone sits back and waits for someone else to give the lead then we end up with the situation that we in fact have sometimes. So we may not really excuse ourselves from involvement in the Mass because others are not very enthusiastic. This is all too often a cloak for the fact that we are just not prepared to make the effort.

If we are Christian Catholics then let us have the courage to be proud of this and to show it to our neighbour at Mass, and to the world at large. It is time we stopped being apologetic about what we are and started being proud of our heritage. It is time that we gave to the Mass something of that enthusiasm that we show for the causes of our concern for the world in the forum of the discussion groups.

It is time that some of the enthusiasm we show for our favourite football team was allowed to flow over into the arena of the sacred and to stand up for Christ. Are we men or mice, when it comes to the Church and what she stands for?

If we are prepared to spend quite some time studying the form of our race horses for the Saturday, then it is time that we woke up to ourselves and started giving some of that time to studying our

Faith and learning just a bit more of what it is about. Then we might stop blaming everyone else for the fact that it means nothing to us, and start doing something about it ourselves!

## CONCLUSION

The Christ-mystery is one of a person: The Incarnate Son who enters our world of time and lives out our salvation in the historical mysteries of his Flesh. In their core, all the Christian mysteries of the historical order, form one single mystery of historic salvation, namely the Saving Christ-Event. So there is but one mystery, though phases of it are necessary in our temporal historic order. With the Ascension the historic mystery of Christ comes to its term, and his earthly mission closes. With the Resurrection, the Christ mystery is totally plunged into glory and eternity.

The person of the Glorified-Lord recapitulates in Himself the whole mystery of salvation. This is exciting, so exciting that the human mind boggles at trying to grasp it; but the sense of excitement that it brings is not something beyond the appreciation of our humanity. In fact our humanity yearns for such an excitement in its very essence. It has all been beautifully geared to man and his deeds.

All that is needed now is for man to do his bit, and to make the constant effort to come that little bit closer day by day to the Mystery that takes place at the altar of the Mass.

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