

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 12: Where Are They Going?

Once upon a time, some people claim, a parish church during Mass was a quiet and orderly place. People arrived before Mass began and stayed until it was over. Once in the pews, few people left them until it was time for Communion, unless they had a medical emergency.

Those days, if they ever really existed, are long gone. Some Sundays, the church seems nearly as busy as Grand Central Station. People arrive five or ten or fifteen minutes after Mass has begun. Some leave as soon as the communion procession starts, and many others run for the doors when the final song begins.

We might raise some questions about the disrespect for the Eucharist that such behavior expresses, but our focus today is on those people who are told to leave before Mass is over.

There are two such groups in many parishes. The first is composed of children who leave the assembly after the opening prayer to go to another place for their own Liturgy of the Word. They usually return during the Preparation of the Gifts and stay for the rest of Mass.

The other group is dismissed after the homily. They are the catechumens, those adults and children of catechetical age who are preparing for baptism. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults calls for them to be dismissed from the assembly every week until they are baptized. Sometimes those who are candidates for full communion with the Catholic Church also leave with the catechumens, since they cannot receive communion until they are formally received into the Church.

Sometimes people wonder why we are so inhospitable to these folks. Why can't they stay for the whole Mass? There are two ways to answer that question. The Church is not trying to be inhospitable, but those who are not yet baptized or received into communion are not able to join us at the table for Communion. That necessary exclusion could seem inhospitable if they were to stay. The more important reason they are dismissed, however, is so that they can continue to be nourished by the Word of God they have shared with the whole assembly.

When they are dismissed, they go to another space where they can continue to reflect upon the Word of God and share their insights about that word. They usually find these sessions very fruitful for their spiritual growth as they prepare for the sacraments. In fact, it is common for them to express a sense of loss once they are able to stay for the whole Mass. While they treasure the Eucharist, they also miss the richness of the sharing they experienced in the dismissal sessions.

Their dismissal from the assembly might remind the rest of us of two important truths. One is that we who are already baptized are blessed by God with the gift of the Eucharist. We might all learn to appreciate more fully the wondrous privilege that is ours. The second truth to remember is the richness of the word of God that we share in the first half of the Mass. Christ feeds us from the table of the word as well as from the table of the body and blood. How blessed are we who are nourished by both!