

The Irreplaceability of One's Personal Presence at the Mass

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On any American scale of efficiency, driving a car is better than taking public transportation; streaming movies is better than watching them in the theater; and livestreaming the Mass is better than going to church. The first is a defining characteristic of American culture: the *automobile* pairs nicely with our *autonomous* spirit and is faster than public transportation. Although Europe would beg to differ. The second refines a mainstay of American leisure: taking an already entertaining experience so that a movie revolves around the comfort of my schedule and needs and not the theater's, thus improving it. Award-winning director and champion of the theater experience, Christopher Nolan, would beg to differ.

The third continues the trajectory. A livestreamed Mass is an improvement on personally going to Mass because it eliminates the hassle of getting dressed and herding the family to the parish. It further eliminates the annoyances of others that distract from worship like the old woman two pews in front of you who is tone deaf but sings with all her might and the toddler whose throwing and stepping on cheerios is a nice distraction from the reading that goes over your head. The Catholic Church, however, would beg to differ.

Livestreamed Masses have been given more credence since the COVID pandemic hit when Masses with congregations were suspended during which time Church leadership encouraged parishioners to watch livestream Masses online in an effort to help people fulfill the third commandment to keep holy the Sabbath. Now that many dioceses have lifted the general dispensation from Sunday Mass, there is still this lingering question in many people's minds: why can't I just stay home and watch a livestreamed Mass? Isn't it just as effective, if not more so?

A big part of the Church's answer to these questions lies in the logic of the incarnation. God was not and is not a distant spectator as His plan of salvation unfolds just as our worship of Him, which is integral to our salvation, is not a spectator activity. God Himself entered into human history through the Blessed Virgin Mary and ultimately mounted the cross and offered Himself for our salvation. He continues to offer the fruits of that salvation through His Body, the Church, when we gather together at our local parish as His Body together with His Head represented through His priest and offer the one, eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the Father through the Holy Spirit.

This sacrificial nature of the Mass is key to understanding the irreplaceability of one's personal presence at it. We are not merely in a purely receptive position at the Mass like we are when we go, to say, a play, sporting event, or any other entertainment event. We go to Mass to offer ourselves in union with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the Father. It is not a mere union of intention, but a union accomplished through our bodies, in an incarnate way. We can never sidestep the incarnation in our relationship with God. It is *the* means by which He interacts with us and offers us salvation. Jesus Christ's personal presence as the incarnate Lord is irreplaceable for our salvation. It is simple. Without His personal, incarnate presence, there is no salvation available. In a similar way, we are called to "offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). This principally occurs at the "source and summit of Christian life," the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. This is the heart of our Christian life, and it is accomplished through personal presence when we gather together as the Body of Christ and offer ourselves in union with the sacrifice of the Jesus Christ and commune with Him and with each other.

The encouragement to tune into livestreamed Masses when Masses with congregations were suspended during the COVID pandemic and certain vulnerable portions of the population are encouraged to stay home is the exception, not the rule. If Jesus Christ's personal, incarnate presence is irreplaceable for our salvation, we can expect nothing less than to reciprocate that lavishly, unfathomable divine act of generosity with our own personal presence at the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

The Mass is not a form of religious entertainment that can be rendered more efficiently through technological means like automobiles and cinema. It is a simple, nuptial encounter between God and His people. No amount of technology can substitute for the simple, relational nature of the encounter. God shows up and promises His eternal faithfulness to us and then offers Himself with His personal, incarnate presence. We respond in kind with our promise of faithfulness and offer our entire personal selves in return. We expect nothing less of God and so God can expect nothing less of us.

Short Bio:

A native of Jacksonville, Fr. John was ordained in May of 2018 and served as parochial vicar at St. Joseph Parish until he was called to pursue a doctorate in Theology at the University of Notre Dame in 2020. He currently resides in South Bend, Indiana at St. Anthony de Padua Parish. Following the successful completion of his doctorate, Fr. John hopes to educate and form future priests in seminary before returning to his first love, parish ministry.