

WHY CATHOLICS DO NOT ATTEND CHURCH ON A REGULAR BASIS

There are about fifty to sixty million baptized Catholics in America. Of these, some 30% are regular churchgoers and the other 70% do not attend church at all, or do so but rarely or on an irregular basis. And still a few, for whatever reason, may prefer or find it convenient to go to a non-Catholic church. Check out the ten reasons listed below why Catholics do not attend church and see if any applies to you.

If you are one of those who do not attend church on a regular basis, or who attend a non-Catholic church, I would be happy to hear what your reasons are.

Reason #1. Hectic schedule

Many people work 60+ hours a week. If they have children, they are often very involved with sports and other activities on the weekend. As a result, church gets squeezed out of their schedule.

Response: The fact is that millions of very busy families in our nation do make it to church, weekend after weekend. Why? Because God and church are a high priority for them. They always find time for what is important.

Reason #2. Laziness

Many Catholics (I am sure many other Christians as well) will readily admit that laziness is the reason they do not make it to church on Sunday. They are just too lazy to get dressed and go to church.

Response: As Catholics, it is our obligation to go to Mass every Sunday unless circumstances beyond our control prevent us from doing so. We should make it a habit and fit it into our schedule every weekend, even when we are traveling. It is important not to break the habit or else it will be easy to fall back into our old ways.

How can we overcome a lazy habit? I'm not sure. I assume that God has to touch our hearts and convince us that coming to church is important. Those who come to church can pray for that touch of God and be good examples of Christian living.

Reason #3. The poor example of clergy and churchgoers

We must all know many non-churchgoers who lead very good lives; they are wonderful neighbors and good co-workers; they are involved in helping the poor and in other worthy causes. While we are happy to acknowledge good non-churchgoers, the same can hardly be said of many churchgoers—who are supposed to live the gospel values. Some are lousy neighbors, rude, greedy, self-centered and unfair in their dealings with others. In short, they are a very poor advertisement for Christianity. Gandhi used to say: "I like your Gospel, but I don't like the way you practice it."

Many Catholics may have also had a bad experience with a priest or other religious. They may have been treated unkindly or been responded to badly in a time of need. But it is, undoubtedly, the persistent reports of sexual molestation of children by priests that have caused enormous damage. (See George Weigel's excellent article which appeared in *Newsweek*, *The Sex Abuse Issue: What Went Wrong*, at the end of this article.)

Response: It would be nice if all churchgoers and clergy were saintly people. Unfortunately, we are not. We are all sinners trying to improve our lives. It has been said that the "church is a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints." If we read the New Testament, we will quickly discover that some of the Apostles were rather imperfect, and find that within the first Christian communities, lots of bickering and even scandalous behavior occurred.

People sometimes search for a perfect church. No such church exists. Having said that, we who do go to church, have a huge responsibility to be good examples of Christian behavior to all we come in contact with. It is scandalous when churchgoing Christians act in ways that are contrary to the teachings of Christ.

Reason #4. "The Mass is boring"

Response: I know parents have heard that statement from their children. But many adults equally find the Mass boring. They bring a 'consumer mentality' to Church in their search of a message and worship service that will uplift them.

The Catholic Mass is a reenactment of the Last Supper, which took place the evening before Jesus died a cruel death on the cross. We can assume that it was a very serious and solemn event. We can also assume that it was in no way entertaining.

We come to Mass primarily to give thanks to God (Eucharist=Thanksgiving) for sending us Jesus. If we come mainly "to be fed," we may set ourselves up for disappointment. Of course, at the most "boring Mass," we are always fed with the most precious Body and Blood of Christ. What food/drink could be better than that? Having said all that, those in charge of preparing the liturgy should do all they can to always make it a prayerful and uplifting service for all who attend. When the music and homily are dull and uninspiring, and the congregation unfriendly and disinterested, it is very hard to feel blessed by the liturgy. So it behooves *everyone*: presider, music and song leaders, readers, greeters, and the congregation to be the best they can be every time they participate in Mass.

An added challenge in big Catholic parishes is the number of Masses on the weekend. It would be great to have wonderful choirs, cantors, musicians, homilists and congregation at *every* mass, but this is not easy. Nevertheless, we must endeavor to make every Mass as prayerful and inspiring as we can. To that end, *you* can help by being as friendly and involved as you can at Mass, joining in the singing and praying with devotion.

Reason #5. Loss of faith in the Eucharist

Response: Our belief that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass is firmly rooted in Scripture (Jn 6:53-71, 1 Cor. 11:28-34). We believe that when we receive the bread and wine at Mass, we are actually receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. A Baptist minister once said: "If I believed what you Catholics believed about the Eucharist, I would come crawling on my hands and knees to receive my Savior." Unfortunately, millions of Catholics who are raised to believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, lose that faith or it becomes unimportant to them. This is true not only for non-churchgoers, but also for Catholics who attend other Christian churches that do not serve the Eucharist, or serve it infrequently. If a Catholic truly believed in his/her heart that the Jesus who lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago was now truly present—body, soul and divinity—in the bread and wine at every Mass, how could he/she not come to partake of the Eucharist?

Interestingly enough, the reason why there are many Protestant converts to Catholicism, and many returning Catholics, is because of their new-found faith and understanding of what the Eucharist is all about. People interested in stories of conversion/return to the Catholic faith are encouraged to read *Surprised by the Truth* books. There are now three different books, each one relating a dozen or more stories of converts or reverts (returning Catholics). Copies of the *Surprised by the Truth* books may be purchased from amazon.com.

Reason #6. Lack of support from a spouse or extended family

Response: Blessed are those families where *both* spouses make it a point to attend church on Sunday, and twice blessed are the young families who have extended relatives in the area who also attend church regularly. For them, attending Mass is a great time to be together, perhaps go to breakfast or lunch afterwards. It is very sad when the opposite is true. One spouse may have little or no interest in church; even parents who live in the area may have lost faith in the Eucharist and in church. This is a situation where the other spouse has to be very strong especially if they have teenagers and/or small children. However, I believe that when one parent makes a big effort to come to Mass with the children despite little or no support from the other parent or other relatives, God must be particularly pleased with such a person.

Reason #7. Hassle of getting very young children ready and keeping them quiet in church

Response: I am sure all parents of very young children will agree that this is a big challenge, especially if they have two or more children. The good news is that many wonderful parents rise to the challenge Sunday after Sunday. God bless them!

Dealing with very young children in church. The preferred option is to have them in church. Whether we realize it or not, young children are taking into their little minds and hearts the sights, sounds and smell (e.g., incense), and everything that is going on in church. As most of you know, I do encourage parents to sit up front with their young children so that they can see what is transpiring. I strongly discourage families from sitting in the cryroom.

If during Mass, one parent has to get up and take a child out for a short break, that is okay. Some parents

bring a children's bible or another type of children's book. Consider rewarding children for good behavior. One dad rewards his children by going to the hall for a donut after Mass. If one child misbehaves, he/she gets to watch his/her siblings eat their donut!

Some parents feel that the hassle of trying to keep their children quiet in church is just too much. In such a case, they can make good use of our free childcare during the 9:30 am and 11:30 am Masses. Another option is to alternate. One spouse could come to church one Sunday while the other remained at home with the children, and vice versa the following Sunday. While this is a less preferred option, it is much better than both parents remaining at home.

Reason #8. Problems with some of the Church's teachings

Response: It would be nice if all of us fully embraced and practiced all of the teachings of Christ and the Church. The truth is that most do not. Life is imperfect and so are we. Having said that, some teachings are central to who we are as Catholics, e.g., the teachings expressed in the Creed, the seven sacraments and the Ten Commandments. For most of us, coming to embrace and practice the teachings of Christ and his Church is a work always in progress.

Reason #9. Bad things happening to good people can cause some Catholics to separate themselves from God and Church

Response: When bad things happen to people who try to live a good life, it can be a faith-buster. We don't understand how a good and all-powerful God does not heal one's child or one's sick spouse who is only 45 years old. Such an experience can cause one to quit relating to God or to relate to him in a very superficial way. A break in our relationship with God usually leads to a break in our relationship with the Church.

Needless to say, no one has a good answer as to why God allows bad things, even terrible things, to happen to very good people. After all, he allowed his own Son to die a terrible death. Sooner or later, faith involves trusting God's ways even when they make absolutely no sense to us. Sometimes the ways of a parent makes no sense to a child. Ideally, the bad stuff in life is only a "faith-tester" and not a "faith-buster." In tough times, our faith is indeed tested. But

if we hang in there (like couples in difficult times), our faith will deepen.

Hopefully, none of us have to go through difficult times without the support of faith-friends. Surely one reason to be involved in church is to connect with people who can help us through the painful moments of life, especially through those times that shake up our faith. Finally, when we are going through tough times, Satan's plan is to make us bitter and angry at God. God's plan is to use the bad times to deepen our faith relationship with him.

Reason #10. I do my own thing spiritually. I don't want to be involved with an institutional church with all its rules and laws

Response: God made us to be social human beings and did not intend for us to be spiritual loners in life. "It is not good for men to be alone" (Gen 2: 6). Shortly after Jesus started his public ministry, he called twelve Apostles to be part of his team. In Matt 16, we read that Jesus created a Church, and in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' followers gathered together weekly to pray together and listen to the teachings of the Apostles. Institutional religion is *God's* idea. When we read the *Acts of the Apostles*, we find absolutely no basis for what we can call a "churchless Christianity"— that does not involve participation in a church family.

Surely, a big church like the Catholic Church with over a billion members can seem too bureaucratic and political at times. But through it all, God has created thousands of very holy people.

Protestant Historian Reflects

Regarding the Catholic Church, the English Protestant historian, Thomas Babington MacCaulay (19th century) wrote:

There is not, and there never was on earth, a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon... The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday compared with the line of Supreme Pontiffs... The republic of Venice...was modern when compared with the Papacy.... The Papacy remains not in decay,... but full of life and vigor.

The Church saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist... We feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished in Antioch... And she may still exist... When some traveler from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.

If you do not attend church on a regular basis, I would love if you would e-mail me and share with me your thoughts and feelings about the church.
email tobin2@live.com

Morning Prayer

God of my life, I welcome this new day.

It is your gift to me,

A new creation, a promise of resurrection.

I thank you for the grace of being alive this morning.

I thank you for the sleep that has refreshed me.

I thank you for this chance to make a new beginning.

This day, Lord, is full of promise and opportunity;
let me waste none of it.

This day is full of mystery and the unknown:
help me to face it without fear or anxiety.

This day is blessed with beauty and adventure;
make me fully alive to it.

During this day keep me thoughtful,
prayerful and kind.

May I be courteous and helpful to others,
and not turned in on myself.

Keep me from any word or deed
that would hurt or belittle another.

And may the thoughts of my mind be
pleasing in your sight.

When night comes again, may I look back on this day
with no grievance or bitterness in my heart.

And may nobody be unhappy because of anything
I have done or anything I have failed to do.

Lord, bless this day for me and everyone.

Make it a day in which we grow to have the mind of
Christ, your Son. Amen.