

Five ways to “get more” out of Mass

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“...the faithful take part [in the Mass] fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.”
Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 11

Your baptismal rights and responsibilities

When we graduate, our diploma says we have “rights and responsibilities” that our degree confers on us. So too does our baptism.

In the Mass, you have the right to understand what you are doing and to participate as fully as possible. It’s your pastor’s duty to ensure that you’re aware of what’s happening, why, and what it means. This happens through good catechesis, but it also happens naturally when the Mass is celebrated well.

It’s also the pastor’s duty to make sure you can actively engage in the Mass. This is because your full participation in the Mass is actually the best way you learn how to be Christian! The Church says it this way:

[T]his full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 11)

Although it’s your pastor’s duty to ensure your liturgical rights, you also have responsibilities. That responsibility is to come to Mass prepared and ready to participate in it as best you can. Here are five ways to help you do just that.

A Parent’s Prayer for Sunday Morning

God, help us get to church today with minimal fuss and fighting, with everyone dressed and ready to pray, with all our bags packed, prepared for anything. And if the kids gets fussy and distracted, please let there be a song to soothe them, a colorful window to enchant them, and kind pew mates to accept our flaws.

1) Pray daily

Praying is a skill you have to practice. To participate as best we can at Sunday Mass, we each have to pray daily. Daily prayer attunes our eyes, ears, and hearts to God who is always present to us every moment of the day.

This may be hard. Who has time to pray? But remember that prayer is first about *listening* to God; it’s not so much about saying things *to* God. So if all you can do is spend one minute of silence each day, that’s a great start to a discipline of prayer. Try to incorporate stillness along with that silence, and in that one minute, focus just on listening to God in the silence.

As part of your daily prayer, find some time during the week to read the Scriptures assigned for the upcoming Sunday. (You can find them at the United States bishops’ website: uscgb.org.) Sunday shouldn’t be the first time you encounter these readings.

2) Bring more than yourself to Mass

If you want to get more out of Mass, you have to bring more than yourself to it.

- In your mind and heart, bring the names of those people who have asked you to pray for them;
- those you love who are hurting this week;
- those people and places in the news that are suffering.
- Bring your joys, things you are grateful for this week;
- and your sorrows, your burdens, regrets, and worries this week.
- Bring money...no kidding.

Giving money at Mass is really not optional. Our Christian sacrifice is not some vague theoretical idea. We have to give

A Prayer When Mass Feels Empty

They say the Mass is the source and summit, but lately, Lord, it’s just been empty. Yet you have promised never to abandon us. So do not let me grumble but make me instead an instrument of your peace.

Where there is apathy, let me be your passion. Where there is coldness, let me be your warmth. Where there is unwelcome, an open hand. And where there’s division, communion.

O Master, grant that I may never seek so much to be filled as to be emptied of myself, to be right as to listen, to be comforted as to be moved to action.

For it is in giving ourselves that we receive you, in forgiving others that we are forgiven, and in dying to what we require that we gain all we need.

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☞ Currently, how do you decide how much money to give at Mass? Do you need to reassess how much you give each week?

something of ourselves that is a real sacrifice—something we’d rather not give up. For most of us today, that’s money. The collection at Mass isn’t just a way the church pays its bills. It’s primarily the way we bring ourselves—“the work of human hands” along with the “fruit of the earth”—to the altar. That’s why the collection is brought forward with the bread and wine we use at Mass. The money we put in the basket helps the church do the mission of Christ—yes, by keeping the lights on, but also by funding the activities and people of the church who help the poor, teach the faith, prepare the liturgy, visit the sick.

Giving money at Mass is also a way we express our trust in God. Remember the widow in the gospel who gave just two pennies to the Temple while others gave much more (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4)? Jesus said she gave the most because she gave out of her lack while the others gave from their surplus. So don’t worry if you can’t give a lot of money. Give what you can, then think about giving just a few dollars more.

Lastly, bring your voice. Like putting money in the collection, singing is not optional. If you think you have an awful voice, make it part of your sacrifice to give back to God what God gave you! If you can’t bring yourself to do even that, then at least pick up the songbook and pretend to sing. Part of your responsibility is to encourage others to take their responsibility seriously too. Others will feel more comfortable singing if the people around them are singing or at least look like they’re singing too. So don’t hinder someone else’s singing by keeping silent when it’s time for everyone to sing.

3) Practice silence and stillness at Mass

Once you’ve been praying daily, it’s a little easier to do this step at Mass. Try to come to Mass early so you can have a few moments of silence before the Mass begins. Now, the room itself doesn’t have to be silent for you to find some quiet space in yourself to focus on what you’re about to do. So don’t go shushing those around you before Mass—that pretty much defeats the purpose of quieting yourself. It just puts you in a bad mood and doesn’t win you more friends at church. Remember, Jesus was able to fall asleep in the boat even while a storm raged all around him and his disciples (Mt 8:23-27). So be like Jesus if your neighbors aren’t as quiet as you’d like them to be. In fact, just start your Sunday Mass experience right and offer up a prayer for them.

During Mass, try to practice some silence and stillness at three appointed times:

1. At the Act of Penitence at the beginning of Mass and after each invitation to pray (“Let us pray”); these silences give us time to call to mind our sins and to offer our own silent prayers.
2. After the readings and the homily; in these silences we meditate on what we’ve heard; and
3. after everyone has shared in Communion; here we each give thanks and praise to God in our hearts.

If you can, accompany your silence with some stillness as well. Closing your eyes, slowing your breathing, and quieting your body will help you to focus your mind and heart.

4) Actively seek Christ at Mass

There are several ways Christ is present at Mass. Christ is present most especially in the Eucharist, and most of us learned that Christ is also present in the person of the priest who leads us in prayer. Christ is also present in the Scriptures, so much so that when we hear them read aloud at Mass, we believe that it is Christ speaking. Last but perhaps most essentially, Christ is present in the people when they gather to sing and pray, for Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).

This last place may be the hardest for us to see Christ readily (remember those noisy neighbors?). But to be part of the church, we have to gather with others and learn to pray well with them, too, even if we don’t know them or even like them.

- So look for Christ in someone new at Mass,
- and look for Christ in someone you might not get along with. That may be the person sitting right next to you; or it might be that person at church who simply gets on your nerves that day. Try to see them as God sees them: as one of his own beloved children.
- See Christ as you share the Sign of Peace. Look the person in the eye, and see in them Christ in disguise.
- Look for Christ in what you see: a piece of artwork in the church you’ve never noticed before; the mother who makes the Sign of the Cross on her baby; the way the sunlight shines through a piece of stained glass.
- Then listen for Christ in the Scriptures and homily, but also in the songs and prayers, in the silence and in the chatter of toddlers, in the voices of those who sing and pray with you.

Finally, seek Christ in what you do. When you make the Sign of the Cross, do so slowly, intentionally. When you genuflect or bow, stand, sit, or kneel, do so reverently and actively, that is, attend to what you’re doing and place your focus on what’s happening in the Mass at that moment.

5) Take more than yourself and the bulletin home

As you leave the church, think of one thing that you want to remember from Mass this week. Maybe it’s a word or a song you heard, or a person or a thing at church you saw. Or a feeling you had at a particular moment at Mass. Take this memory with you, and pray with it during the week. Ask yourself what might God be asking you to do or learn this week because of this memory he has given you.

☞ Which of these steps feels easiest for you to do? Commit to continue that practice and to encourage others to do it too.

Which one feels hardest to do? What can you commit to this week to get closer to doing that practice more regularly?
