

The need to rest in the soothing familiarity of the Mass

He had more personality than I like, the priest who celebrated the Mass in a parish I visited one Sunday evening. Speaking in a loud, dramatic voice, making big gestures, adding emotional words to the rite, even telling us to repeat the “Alleluia” with more enthusiasm.

Not my kind of thing – not my kind of thing *at all* – but clearly appreciated by the people around me. Not too many years ago, I would have spent Mass muttering to myself about the priest.

At some point, I saw that there are at least two different ways to think about our experience of the Mass, and that we tend to hold the one that fits us and gives us what we want and need. And rightly so. We live in a body, and the different parts need different things.

We might call the two ways the restful and the active, or the receptive and the engaged.

I want restful and receptive. I think the words and actions of the Mass are something like the words and beads of the Rosary: something whose familiarity and predictability let you reflect and meditate, even though you are still conscious of the words and their meaning. You relax into the Mass. You rest in the Mass. You swim, because if you don't swim you sink, but you swim in a current that carries you.

That gives me what I want and need. It expresses who I am. But I'm not everyone – a lesson it took me too many years to learn, and one I still regularly forget. As, probably, do you sometimes. Especially when thinking about things like the

liturgy in which we're all so invested.

Some of our brothers and sisters prefer the active and engaged. The priest, for one.

Some seem to think of the Mass as something more like a concert, especially a performance of music by a difficult composer. It requires active listening and engagement to follow the twists and turns. You have to be on your toes. The priest used his dramatic style to poke the people who were nodding off. He wants you to get everything out of it you can.

Others seem to be "geeking out." They love the Mass and know its ins and outs. They want everyone else to love it and know it that well, too. In being so dramatic, the priest was saying, "Did you get that? Isn't this amazing?"

I appreciate that way of enjoying the Mass. Understanding how people like that experience the coming of the Lord in the Mass keeps me from muttering at the dramatic priest as I would once have done. It helps me appreciate that the man who loves Jesus is bringing me Jesus, and all the people around me who aren't like me receive him, too. Even if they and the priest do it in a way I don't like.

I appreciate the active and engaged, but I'd still argue for the restful and reflective. Much of Catholic life consists of settling in, of finding your place and growing there. Prayer, for example, isn't just telling God what we want him to know or asking him for things we or others need. It's also resting in him, hanging out with him, listening to him and learning more and more what he wants of us – and particularly how much he wants for us, how much he loves us, how much he wants to give us.

Being restful and receptive at Mass actually gives us the best way to be engaged. C.S. Lewis expressed the kind of thing I mean in a chapter in his book (published just after he died) "Letters to Malcolm." A service works best, he wrote, "when,

through long familiarity, we don't have to think about it."

In the truest experiences, you lose yourself in the enjoyment of a loved one and thereby find your real self. The self-giving of marital sexuality as Catholics understand it gives us the great model. He who loses himself shall save it.

Lewis used the image of the dance. "As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God."

David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.