

Are we turning Christ's house into a meeting place?



A few columns back, I wrote about [how we can pray the Mass well](#), offering some ideas for how to prepare before the liturgy begins and how to participate throughout. Despite my best intentions, I still get distracted and can have a hard time focusing. But I'm trying. And from your letters, it sounds like you are, too.

In recent issues, two readers shared their experiences – and, specifically, the difficulties – with praying after Mass. The general conclusion: Once Mass is over, it's a social free-for-all.

One reader, Armel Audet, shared: “We had a priest in our parish who came from Eastern Europe. His brother priest was shot in front of him by the Nazis. He became a holy man. When he passed in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he would kneel down reverently and stay there for a moment. Nobody dared talk in church when he was present.

“I can still picture the priest who replaced him coming out of the sacristy on a Sunday morning with his hands in his pockets and going straight to the people to chat. In no time, the church became a place to socialize. If you wanted to prepare for Mass, you had to do it in your car.”

Another reader, Al Severino, wrote: “We in the Roman Catholic Church, at least in the United States, have lost our sense of sacredness when it comes to the holy sacrifice of the Mass. I can live with the conversations before and after daily Mass. I cannot live with the conversations before and especially after Sunday Mass. The moment the priest leaves the sanctuary the

flood gates open up and the talking starts. We have become a church of socialization.”

I admit I’m part of the problem. While my church is quiet before Mass, except the pianist playing in the background, it doesn’t take long for the final hymn to end for people to begin talking. While myself and many of my friends take a minute or so to thank God for the gift we received of himself in the Eucharist, we, too, take the time post-Mass to socialize in the pews. Socialization, as I’m sure our letter writers would agree, is not the issue. We are a community and should be able to talk after being united in the holy Mass. But as much as Jesus is happy for us to be celebrating our communion as the Body of Christ, there is something to be said about not turning the church proper where we receive Our Lord into a common meeting place.

Now, I understand that this isn’t feasible or practical in many churches. Some, including my parish, don’t have a good gathering space where people can chat. True, there is the narthex, but it gets crowded quickly. And then there is the basement cafeteria, but we are still in the process of raising money for an elevator so our elderly parishioners can join the full community for coffee and donuts.

And yet, these are just excuses. Because, when we truly think about it, the church is the throne room for our king. Jesus sits in his throne in the tabernacle within the sanctuary, and we are called to gather before him with the love, worship and reverence owed a king. Some may argue that Jesus can be treated as our friend, and rightly so, but certain spaces are meant to help us recognize more than Christ’s humanity, specifically his divinity and kingship. The church is such a space.

There might not be a perfect solution at my church or yours. Maybe one step could be encouraging your family or friends to step outside to talk. Maybe it’s simply to try and keep our

voices more hushed while in the church nave. Maybe it's making sure your back isn't toward the tabernacle so as to keep Jesus in the conversation. Take it to prayer. See what the Lord is calling you to do.

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