

Aug. 23-24, 2014

Thoughts from the pastor,

What is the difference between the parish picnic and the Mass? For most people that seems like a real dumb question because they know that there is a big difference, but only some who think that are correct in the differences. For many of our non-Catholic Christian churches the Sunday service can be a lot like a picnic.

About seventeen years ago I spent three months in California going back to school. One of the possibilities for priests is that we can take the opportunity every ten years or more to upgrade our programming. Sorry, I am not really a computer but some days I have to think like one to get along with them. During that time in California I had most weekends off so I would go to Mass and then attend services in churches of different denominations. I got to about fifteen different kinds of services. It was very enlightening. One service was in a school gym. I thought I had come late because there were things going on when I got there. What I found out by attending that there really wasn't a start or a finish to the service. The minister was up in front by the stage orchestrating the activities. Everyone else was in folding chairs in front of him, except the musical group which was on the stage behind him.

The minister would read something from Scripture and then talk about it for a while. There didn't seem to be any theme to that. Then he would pray about what he had talked about for a while. Then he would invite the musicians to play a song or two. Then the minister would call people up who wanted to be prayed over concerning a difficulty they might be dealing with. Then the cycle would start over or maybe it would be in a different order. It went on for three hours that I know about.

There didn't seem to be any clear beginning or end. It was very informal. There were donuts set up on tables behind the people and at any point in the service anyone could and did go back and have a donut or two. There was also a table with some reading materials that they could go to and browse or take stuff to read while the other activities were happening. Most people stayed focused on the minister for most of the service, but often there were people chatting with each other in the chairs or by the donut tables. To me it seemed a lot like an indoor family picnic but there was less food and more community building.

For many Christians Sunday services look nothing like our Mass. There is a spectrum that goes from informal family or congregational gathering with songs and talks and fellowship with food to our side of the spectrum where we have very set rituals that we follow. But each end of that spectrum has its purpose. The informal gathering is to build fellowship and form a community that God can be proud to see in action because they love their neighbor as themselves. The rituals that we focus on are to prepare ourselves for the banquet of the Lord as it will be in heaven by participating in it in our limited way on earth. The food is the same on earth as it will be in heaven. It is the Bread of Life, Jesus. We follow rituals that He set down for us so we can stay connected with Him as He outlines. That focuses us on love God with your whole heart, soul and body.

As Catholics we can get into the rituals in a negative way by just tolerating them for the hour and then getting on with our lives. But we would be missing the point, for in those rituals God is gathering us together to show us who He wants us to be for the rest of the week and the rest of eternity. Part of that is that He wants us to be His family. So periodically we have a family picnic and we have fun with each other. It is not Mass but it is part of living out what the Lord is trying to build us in to. I hope to see you there.

God bless you all,
Fr. Frank