

Declining Sacramental Life of the Church an Alarming Trend

Msgr. Robert Batule, March 28, 2019

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Where are you headed? This is not just a question the cabbie asks when you get into his car in a big city somewhere in [America](#). It is also a question we ask ourselves as Catholics. With Lent in progress, we know the answer: We are headed to Easter and we get there by following the apostles Peter and John in their run to the empty tomb. We do not, however, run through Lent. Lent is a time to slow down and think seriously about serious matters.

By thinking seriously about serious matters, I do not have in mind the intricacies of Trinitarian theology or the subtleties in atonement theology—although it is never unwise to think about these matters. What I have in mind are the realities of ecclesial life in large swaths of the United States at the present time.

Decades ago, I had the good fortune to meet a dedicated religious priest at a wedding. At the reception following the nuptial Mass, we were seated next to each other, and from that time forward we were friends. In the discussions that good friends have over the years, good priest friends, that is, the topic of the Church was ever present. Often, my priest friend would remark, “The Church means less and less to more and more Catholics.”

Never mind that this priest had me by more than a few years, but he had also travelled widely in the United States because of responsibilities related to his ministry. Having age and experience on his side, I was inclined to trust my friend’s observation. In fact, I did not have to extend the benefit of the doubt to him in the matter of what the Church means to Catholics today. I could see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears what was occurring in the lives of Catholics whom I met in pastoral setting after pastoral setting. My own ministry was already showing me what had been manifested to my friend over a much longer span of time.

What you may ask at this point is: what are you referring to, Monsignor? What examples can you give in support of your thesis? Well, let me [offer](#) a few illustrations.

Every year at the Easter Vigil, in most parishes, men and women are baptized and received into the Church. In some places, the numbers are small but that is not always the case. In a diocese, when you add up all the parishes, the numbers of baptisms and receptions into full communion run into the hundreds or perhaps exceed one, two, or three thousand in large archdioceses. What happens when the Church marks the Second Sunday of Easter or the Solemnity of Pentecost? The newly initiated and the newly received—most of them, anyway—vanish and are not seen again in our parishes by priest or congregant.

Regular churchgoers have known for a while now that Mass attendance is not what it used to be. Reliable surveys indicate that weekly attendance is somewhere in the range of 18 to 25 percent, with higher and lower median averages depending on specific locale and other factors across the nation. Not so well known to Catholics are the steep falloffs in infant baptisms, weddings, and funerals. In just one of the categories mentioned, weddings, estimates are that church weddings are off by two-thirds in heavily Catholic areas compared with only thirty years ago. If you are doubtful about the downward shifts in weddings, infant baptisms, and funerals, you would do well to check out the statistics for these indices of Catholic life through the publication of the annual *The Official Catholic Directory*, which was known for the longest time as the *Kenedy Directory*. Go back fifty years, forty years, thirty years, twenty years, or even just a decade and you will be amazed at the enormous differences in reported sacramental celebration.



One thing *The Official Catholic Directory* will not be able to tell you is the massive decline in sacramental confessions. For that, you will have to show up in your parish church at the regularly scheduled period for celebrating the Sacrament of Penance. Thirty years ago, it was not unusual for a priest to sit in a confessional for ninety minutes and hear confessions without any “downtime.” Not today though. It is *mostly* “downtime” with very few penitents going to have their sins absolved.

Much can be adduced to explain the phenomena cited above from a sociological perspective. Surely that would be helpful but only to a point. What is needed is a more fundamental explanation, one which must concern itself with the *Church’s nature* and how this is, unfortunately, lost on many Catholics today.

Since sociology helps but only up to a point, let us [start](#) there. Sociology, as an academic discipline, studies institutions and the services they provide to those within the social matrix. According to the applicable taxonomy, the Church is a mediating institution. She mediates between persons and the society to which they belong. She is a “go-between,” putting persons in a more salutary relationship with each other and over against other, more “depersonalizing” institutions. However, this kind of mediating is basically along a functionalist axis, and thus has nothing to do with what Catholics believe *as Catholics*.

The Church, *by her nature*, is mediating. But the mediation she exercises does not start with what we do. It begins with Christ, the Mediator (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). He is the One who puts us in a relationship, an ontological relationship, with the Blessed Trinity, and this new reality commences for us with baptism. It is important to note however, that baptism inaugurates but does not complete our sacramental incorporation into Christ. In the sacramental ministry—from baptism through the Anointing of the Sick—the Church has a concrete means by which Jesus the Mediator reaches people who were not on earth when he was. Through the sacramental ministry—again, from baptism through the Anointing of the Sick—the mediation accomplished once and for all in Christ reaches people today through his Body, the Church.

All of this is put forward succinctly and directly for us in *Lumen Gentium* where the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council say that “the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament.” (1) She is the sacrament *par excellence* because “[t]he one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains [her as] the community of faith.” (8)

Just a few years after the close of Vatican II, then-Father Joseph Ratzinger delivered lectures that he would later publish as *Introduction to Christianity* (1968). In this volume, the future Pope Benedict XVI writes: “[T]he sacramental idea ... [forms](#) the heart of the concept of the Church: Church and sacrament stand or fall together; a Church without sacraments would be an empty organization, and sacraments without a Church would be rites without meaning or inner connection.”

The problem we need to face up to, pastorally, is why so many Catholics choose to forsake sacramental celebration as a regular feature of Catholic life. Could it be that so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ view the Church as “an empty organization?” Or do they see the sacraments as “rites without meaning or inner connection?” As then-Father Joseph Ratzinger says above, “Church and sacrament stand or fall together.” Right now, these two pillars of faith are not standing all that well.

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