

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

St. John 10:11-18

A few years ago a mother said to me that unless the Mass was more entertaining she wasn't going to bring her children anymore. She said it was my job to make sure that her children were entertained by providing activities for them in the middle of the Mass.

This is one of the great tragedies of the 21st century. We have become accustomed to being entertained. We have become passive spectators to the world. Television adverts and news reports are no more than thirty seconds long because that's all we can handle. So when we come to Mass people are bored because there is nothing really to watch.

The second Vatican Council spoke of the idea of actual participation. It was not a new idea. Pope Pius X first spoke of this in 1903. The reason being was that at that time many people would come to church during the Mass but not participate in the Mass itself. Instead they would pray their own private prayers whilst the Mass happened somewhere in the background. This is not to say that private prayers don't matter. They do matter and they matter very much. But the Mass itself is a public prayer. In fact, the greek word for it from which we get our English word liturgy is a word you will see by roadworks in Greece. It literally means, "public works." So the divine liturgy, the Mass, is a public work. It is not simply the Priest who stands at the altar but rather it is the Priest who stands in the person of Christ and leads the people of Christ on a pilgrimage to heaven. The prayers of the Priest are the prayers of the people.

Unfortunately, over the past sixty years the idea of actual participation has come to be distorted. Often now people think it means that children should perform in the Mass, or that everyone has to do something and that unless you are doing something you are not involved. But the fact is everyone is, or should

be, doing something. It doesn't mean that everyone serves at the altar, or everyone reads, or everyone brings up the offertory, or everyone is in the choir. These are ministries in service of the Mass. What it does mean is that everyone is doing something when they join their minds and hearts and bodies to the prayers of the Mass.

This is the other tragedy of our century. That we have forgotten the unity of body and soul. That our bodies give expression to our souls and our souls are expressed through our bodies. The postures of the Mass—standing, sitting, kneeling, the sign of the Cross—all of these are expressions of our souls. God created the world and all that is physical, and God became Man in Jesus Christ so we know that the body is sacred. It is not simply a vessel for our souls but it is united to our souls and that is what makes us human beings. In fact, the souls in heaven have a sense of longing until the day of the resurrection when they will be united again with their bodies.

So to actively participate in the Mass means joining yourself—body and soul—to the prayers and gestures of the Mass. To pray silently in your minds and hearts and bodies what the Priest prays out loud, to respond to the prayers and to give your acclamation, your “Amen”, to what is being professed, to unite your voices with the chants and the hymns of the Mass as do the Angels. To recognise that you are not a passive spectator but an engaged participant who unites your prayers with the prayers of the Church.

When I was in seminary one of my lecturers told me that she had attended the divine liturgy at a Greek Orthodox church. She said at first she was thoroughly confused. She said Deacons and Priests were chanting over each other, people were moving back and forth, there was always a cloud of incense, and she didn't understand a word that was being said. But then she forgot about all this. And she abandoned herself to it all. It was only then, she said, that she finally understood that she didn't have to understand what was happening. That this was the work of God not of man, but that by giving herself over to the

prayers and the chants and the hymns and the postures that these things carried her.

So let's not seek to be entertained or to sit back and watch as things go by but recognise that the sacred signs and gestures of the Mass have a great power to open us up to the holiness of God.