

GOD'S LOVE AND THE MASS

by [Fr. Billy Swan](#) · September 05, 2017



I remember an occasion in our parish school having a lively discussion with teenagers on the Mass. Naturally, I was encouraging them to take part each Sunday and was trying to help them understand what it's about. At one point, a young man blurted out his frustration: 'but Father, the Mass is boring! It's the same thing every time!' Boom! How does one respond to that? In a moment of inspiration from the Holy Spirit, I responded with something like this. 'Well, in one sense you are right. It is the same thing every time. But let me ask you a question. If you were a husband and as you went out to work every morning you told your wife that you loved her, would she say something like 'please stop saying that! It's boring! You told me that yesterday. There is no need to repeat it'. Of course she wouldn't! If she knew that those words were from your heart and that you meant them every time you said 'I love you' then it would never be boring for her to hear them again. As her husband, the love you are offering her is for the moment that counts most – that moment and that day. In the same way, the Mass might appear to be the same every time but it is God's way of saying to us 'I love you' at that moment and on that day'. I silence descended on the class. A chord had been struck.

Let's explore this further. If the Mass is God's way of loving us then how do we experience this love? Imagine for a moment the love of God being a circle of love where the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and the Holy Spirit is the love between them. This is the divine life we see represented in the famous icon of Rublev where the Father, Son and Spirit are all seated at a table on which there is bread and wine. In the front of the table there is a vacant space reserved for us to enter and sit down with them. Here is the moment when God's circle of love has been opened and where we are welcomed and accepted into that exchange love that is shared by the Father, Son and Spirit. Here we enter into the heart of God, into the centre of the life of the Trinity. Right at the very beginning of the Mass, because of our presence, we experience the love of God as unconditional welcome and acceptance. Our God welcomes us and accepts us. What power there is in knowing this! What joy! God's rejoices that we have come like a great father or mother who rejoices to sit down to Sunday dinner, surrounded by their children.

Then comes the experience of God's love with his forgiveness. He forgives our sins when we ask him. He forgives us because he loves us. It's that simple and that beautiful. This is a gift that we receive freely but one which has cost Christ dearly. It was the price he was willing to pay out of love for you and me.

The next experience of God's love in the Mass comes as he speaks to us through his Word. In the readings, the dramatic love story is told once again of God and his people, as recorded in the Bible. It is a story of a faithful God who never stops reaching out to his people, who desires our trust and faith, and who communicates his love to us in ways we can understand. Contained in these stories is a power of love that affirms, blesses and yet challenges us to grow more perfectly in love. When necessary, his Word warns us when we are tempted to stray from the source of love who is God himself. The stories of infidelity to God in the Scriptures are followed by God reaching out even more, offering his people a second chance and a way out of the misery that sin has caused. In these stories we recognise the drama of God's love at work in our own lives today. In the Gospel and homily, the story of Jesus' life comes alive as we see the fullness of God's love revealed – a love that gives itself away in a life laid down for others. Jesus is sent by the Father to save the world with a love that reconciles, heals, unites and goes to the depths of darkness and suffering out of love for those had gone there. Here is the friendship and love of the Father, offered in Jesus, for everyone and for all. As we listen to the Gospels, all of what Jesus' life was about is summed up by his words at the Last Supper: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you' (John 15:9). All that he asks of us is summed up by the great commandment to 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). At the Mass, this love is active once again, offered by the Father through his Son in the Spirit, accepted in gratitude by us, shared and increased.

In the prayers of intercession, we call to mind those who really need our love and support as we present the needs of humanity to the Father through Jesus. Jesus intercedes for us for he knows well the anguish of suffering humanity from his ministry and from the cross.

Having heard and accepted God's Word of love for us, at the offertory we join with Jesus in offering ourselves back to the Father in thanksgiving. Because God never loves us by half but completely, so he asks us to give ourselves completely in love to Him. Therefore, with the bread and wine we offer ourselves totally, all we have and all we are. Then begins the great Eucharistic prayer where the priest, in the name of the Church present, asks the Father to pour out his Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine we have offered, transforming them into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Just as the bread and wine are changed into Christ, so do we become more radiant images or icons of the Lord himself as the

Holy Spirit transforms us and absorbs us further into the life of God. The Eucharistic prayer asks God to unite us closer to himself and all those citizens in heaven who have gone before us and who pray with us at the Mass. Through the Spirit's power of love at work in the Mass, the Church is united in heaven and on earth, lead along the path that leads closer to our final union with God's radiant beauty.

At the Our Father, we realize that we cannot love God as our Father without loving each other as brothers and sisters. At the Mass we go to God together. With the sign of peace we turn and recognise each other as family and realize that together we are a living reflection of God who in his deepest mystery is a family of love, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the Mass God's love unites us closer as family.

Then comes the sublime moment when we receive Holy Communion as the love of the Father gives itself away to us through his Son. Here is the Son of God given by the Father in humble and self-emptying love 'for you', 'for me' and 'for the world'. The Eucharist is God's way of uniting himself to us as food and drink. Just as food and drink is digested and whose nutrients are carried to every cell in the body, so the power of God's Spirit and love can reach, as food, every nook and cranny of our bodies, soul, minds, hearts and wills. By receiving the Eucharist with an open heart, no part of us is left untouched by God as the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ floods and changes our body, blood, soul and humanity. Just as a mother feeds her young so does God feed us whom he loves, not just with food but with himself (see Hos. 11:1, 3-4).

Here is an intimacy with God that no words can fully describe but is the experience and amazing privilege of those who take part in the Mass. For those who know this moment, no words are necessary. For those who don't, no words are possible. Yet this is only a taste of what is to come. It is but a partial sharing in the fuller joy that awaits us in the heavenly banquet in the future.

At the end of Mass, we experience God's love once again as a blessing as the celebration ends. With his blessing we re-enter the world of our work, families and daily routine. But we do so as different people. Experiencing God's love changes us. It changes us to become more like the love we have received. As God has truly given Himself to us in the Mass as self-sacrificing love, so we go and be Eucharist for others, emptied of ourselves, filled with God and ready to serve. In this way the amazing love of God spreads and intensifies like a fire that has been ignited in the awesome prayer of the Mass.

The experience of God's love is never boring. It engages us completely. Because the Mass is an experience of God's love, it should not be boring either. Sadly, for the plucky but honest teenager I met in class that day and for many more, this is how it is experienced. Maybe, just maybe, the reason for this is that we fail to appreciate the Mass as a direct experience of God's love. In the Mass the Lord waits for us and opens the circle of his divine life, allowing us to take our place at table. There he welcomes us, accepts us, forgives us, affirms us, teaches us, corrects us, renews us, transforms us, feeds us, blesses us and finally sends us back into the world again to be witnesses and instruments of that same love. Going to Mass may seem like 'the same thing every time' but it is God's way of saying 'I love you' at that moment and time. This truth changes everything.

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