

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Concluding Rites #16

“Getting out of church” may not seem like a very important issue for most Catholics. “Mass is over when it’s over and we go home”, folks will say, “So, let’s go!” Simple as that.

For the casual observer walking by one of our Catholic parish churches on a Sunday, however, there may be some puzzlement about when precisely the Mass is over and when faithful Catholics are free to leave church. Some folks begin to straggle out immediately after receiving Holy Communion, often with good reason (the kids are screaming!). Others may have come late and never quite gotten themselves completely into the body of the faithful at all.

But, as in many events in which we participate, there is a proper and an improper way to take our leave. When visiting friends or neighbors, we obviously do not simply walk out the door at the end of the evening. There are words of thanks to be said for the food and hospitality, the promise to return on another occasion. It’s a routine habit or custom, but it has meaning and importance. We disregard it at the risk of losing a good friendship.

Obvious as it may seem to weekly, church-going Catholics, there is a proper way to conclude the celebration of the Eucharist. Indeed, there is a purpose to our leaving the house of the church that goes well beyond the need to get to our car and go home.

First of all, the Rite of Communion concludes with the final Collect, the Post Communion Prayer, final prayer of the Mass. It is a prayer of thanksgiving for gifts received and for Christian faith refreshed and renewed.

The Concluding Rite begins with any parish announcements and/or the news of the community: What will draw this community back together in various church activities during the coming week? Who is being married, who is being baptized? What is the progress of those in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)? What are the young people of the parish up to this week? Who in our community will be mourned and given Christian burial? Who are the newcomers, who are joining the parish? In short, the folks need to know what holds this church together as a family from week to week.

Then the assembly is invited to be

blessed for the week's journey in the world. Sometimes this is done simply. At other times, on certain great feasts, it is done solemnly. On those occasions we bow our head and pause in silence to ask for God's blessing. We say Amen to three invocations and then we conclude as we sign ourselves with the sign of Christ's cross.

Finally, we are dismissed/sent forth, by the priest or deacon. Those of us who are old enough to remember the Latin Mass will recall the sung "Ite, Missa est". "Go, the Mass is ended." Today the priest-president or deacon simply says the obvious: "The Mass is ended, go in peace to love and serve the Lord." This is an instruction, a challenge for us to engage the world with the gifts of Word and Eucharist that we have just received.

Whether we sing a dismissal song, exit to instrumental or choir music or whether we simply leave in silence, we know that the work of being Christian has just begun.

The Jewish rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel provides us with the challenge of all who believe in God "Our problem is how to live what we pray, how to make our lives a daily commentary on our prayer book, how to live the consonance with what we promise, how to keep faith with the vision we pronounce."

Truly, the Mass is never over when it seems to be over. It is merely a rehearsal for who we are to be and how we are to be in the world.