

What do church, ceremonies have to do with God, grace?

By JACK WRIGHT

The decline in priestly vocations and a steady exodus of the faithful from the Catholic Church continue unabated. Youngsters dragged to Mass find it less than exhilarating. Many a bored parent attends Mass more through habit or fear than love. And even though often personally afflicted with doubts, they feel conscience-stricken to try to keep their children involved in religious practice. The question may be asked: Is organized religious observance — as opposed to the personal virtue of religion — a dying enterprise? The question might best be framed in terms of a more general consideration of the priestly office and sacraments in general.

According to the old Baltimore Catechism, "a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." The church has had to perform logical gymnastics to accommodate its chosen seven sacraments to this tidy definition. One might conclude the shortage of priests is God's way of telling the Vatican it is on the wrong track.

In the early church, the master of the house blessed the bread, broke it and distributed it, though it is not certain that the meal thus celebrated was the sacramental Eucharist. The practice of the early church with respect to what we call the Mass varied widely until officially made uniform a considerable time after Christ.

The earliest description of the Mass dates from Justin Martyr circa A.D. 150, and reveals that a "president" offered the prayer of thanksgiving, according to his ability, and the people assented with an amen. It's not clear that anyone in particular was commissioned to preside over the Eucharist in the very beginning. Paul never mentions that he presided. In fact, he seems to have been hardly involved. Jack Wright lives in Silver Spring, Md. in

administering the sacraments. Nor is there any indication that any of the apostles ever presided over the Eucharist. It is clear that those who presided did so with the approval of the community.

Not until 1208 did Pope Innocent II issue an official declaration that priestly ordination was necessary to celebrate the Eucharist, and that was more formally enunciated only at Lateran Council IV in 1215. Pope Paul VI has pointed out that the sacrifice is the same no matter who offers it, be it the pope or a priest living in mortal sin, for it is not the celebrant who makes the holy sacrifice but Christ himself who sanctified it first.

The words of transubstantiation are ultimately effective, however, only if they create a true sense of community. Where there is no fellowship, where there is animosity or insensitivity to others, reenactment of the Lord's Supper brings judgment, not grace. What is proclaimed must be lived.

One might be forgiven for questioning church insistence on seven sacraments, which seems quite arbitrary. But then we have such admirable theological stalwarts as Bernard Häring, Avery Dulles, Monika Hellwig and the late Karl Rahner, among a host of others, affirming the validity of seven sacraments after much prayerful reflection. Perhaps the most serviceable conclusion — however disappointingly murky — is: It doesn't matter! After all, how vital are seven sacraments to us anyway?

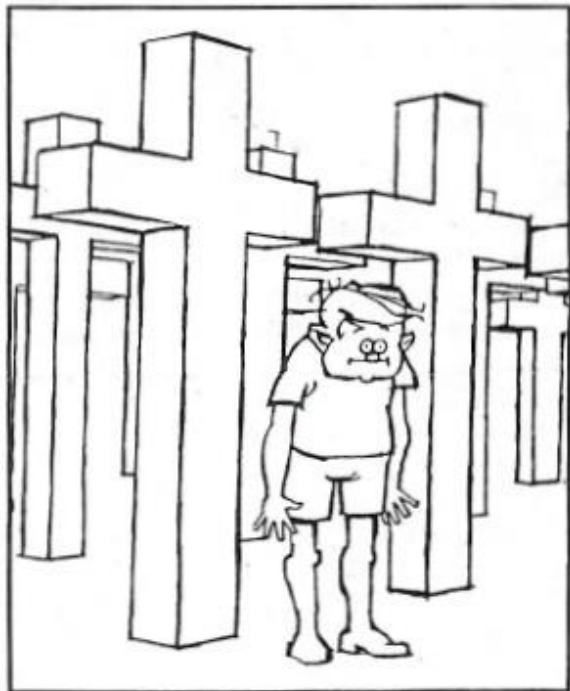
Lots of unbaptized folk Ed to heaven. Lots of Catholics are never confirmed or never receive the sacrament of the sick. And no women (in the Roman church) can yet receive holy orders. Penance, these days, is largely avoided like the plague. Marriage, of course, is not for everybody, and the fact of good second marriages following failed first marriages poses one of the greatest problems confronting the church, whose archaic and dehumanizing annulment procedures have only tended to render the church

irrelevant to a lot of good Christians striving to raise good Christian families.

This leaves the Eucharist, which is, as they say, where we came in. One might treasure reception of the Eucharist more than witnessing the confection of it that is, Mass. And you don't need a priest to convey a validly confectioned host.

Perhaps the foregoing helps explain the circling of the wagons by church authorities with regard to women priests. The only things priests have going

for them anymore is the power to confection the Eucharist, so they guard this privilege jealously.



But this raises one final, disturbing question: How changed for the better are regular communicants compared with noncommunicants? How transforming has a lifetime of frequent communions been in our own lives? How often do our minds (wander to mundane affairs even as the priest approaches us with the divine species? When, if ever, shall we come fully to appreciate the "real presence"? Sacraments are supposed to be encounters with God. In this sense, surely many of us have experienced more "sacraments" merely lying in pain in a hospital or experiencing the death of a loved one than we ever have in church.

The day will come, and is probably already here in so-called base communities, when a priest is

rarely seen — when the laity may celebrate eucharistic ceremonies at home in a true family setting. The failure of centrally organized religious ceremonies is that they have lost their relevance to the real world.

This does not mean that a revival of more meaningful eucharistic ceremonies may not yet be achieved. After all, the Lord commissioned his priests to spread the Good News of our redemption, that we might believe, repent and thus be saved. To the extent that all nations may not yet have heard the word, preaching remains the foremost function of the priest, as Vatican II made clear: "Priests, as coworkers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the gospel to all."

In early tradition the church meant a gathering for religious activity. The church is a communion of faith and love. The family forms a little church, and the church of the home goes back to the very first years of Christianity. Mass, more often than not, as originally testified to in the Acts of the Apostles, was celebrated in a private home — until this was banned in the fourth century. Such a celebration most certainly must have knitted families together.

The early church called the Christian family "a domestic church" or "church of the home," a concept confirmed anew by Vatican II. While the concept would not be complete unless united with parishes and other larger communities within the church, families should be made to recognize that they do form a domestic church. Wherever a family exists and love still moves through its members, grace is present. The church desires that the faithful not be present at Mass as strangers or silent spectators, but that they should partake knowingly, devoutly and actively. This is why Vatican II went a long way to clarify, simplify and make more meaningful the ceremonies of the Mass.

A constant outpouring of caveats from Rome unwittingly signals that what is being so staunchly inveighed against has in fact already come to pass and that it will then only be a question of time before Rome proclaims that the vainly resisted accomplishment is what it has been preaching all along.