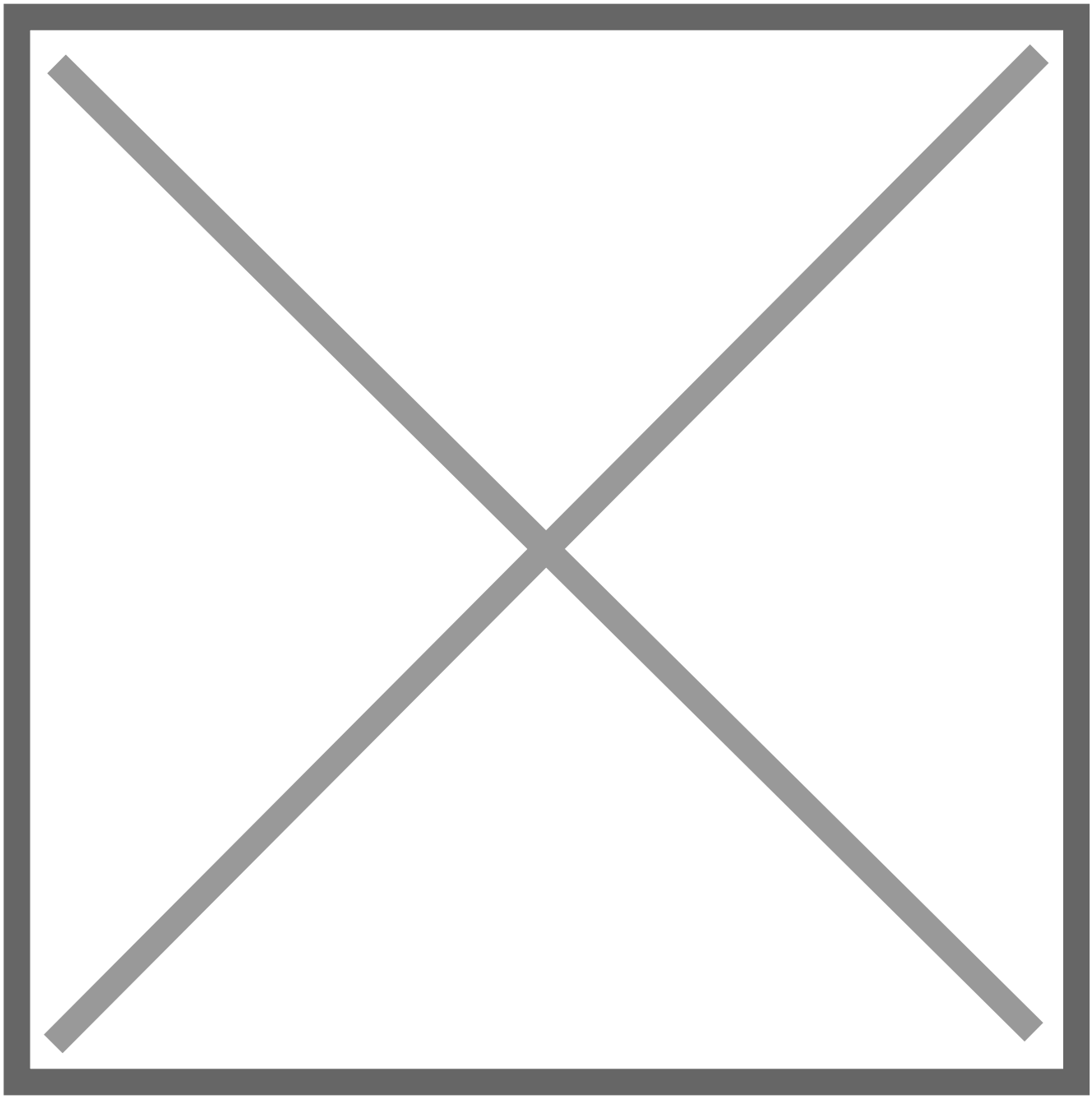
Opinion
Guest Voices



A priest distributes Communion during Mass. (CNS/Reuters/Jon Nazca)



by Mark Piper

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"You know what I'm going to ask you, don't you?"

"No," I said tersely as I shifted my eyes.

"Are you still Catholic?" he inquired earnestly.

I, in fact, knew what he was going to ask. But, having just arrived from Mass, hearing a homily that mostly ignored the readings so the monsignor could mock the motto "follow the science," and temporarily though intentionally veer into an anti-trans admonition, I wasn't exactly filled with vigor or fervor for the faith or the church. (Perhaps avoiding sermonizing on the Gospel had some integrity. This was, after all, when Jesus said it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of needle than for the rich to enter heaven, and the monsignor's column in the bulletin was about how to roll over or collect one's IRA account and include the parish as a beneficiary. Woe that the rich could wait until next quarter's disbursement.)

I was back home, in Madison, Wisconsin, for a memorial service for one of the greatest educators I had ever had the pleasure of learning from — my high school French teacher, Mr. Joe Hesse. As I drove from the church on the isthmus to the community center for the memorial, 1 Peter Chapter 3 came to mind. I knew that one of Mr. Hesse's best friends, who happened to be one of the other great educators in my life — a high school English and journalism teacher, Mr. Wallner — would be there, and I knew he'd resurrect our discussions and debates on the church and he would ask me whether or not I was still Catholic.

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1 Peter, says we must be prepared to give an explanation to anyone who asks for our reason for hope. In the 10-minute drive, I couldn't think of one. The last time I saw Mr. Wallner was also the last time I saw Mr. Hesse, at lunch about five years back, and Mr. Wallner had asked me this question then, too.

This time, after a sigh, I responded, rather succinctly and with far more honesty than I began with. "Yes," I stated.

But unlike during previous conversations, I simply didn't have the heart to do battle with my interlocutor, whom I now viewed as having the far superior upper hand in this debate. For, in the erudite words of Fr. Bryan Massingale, as a Catholic, I'm exasperated.

So, after my affirmative answer, I continued with two points. First, I said, "but the bishops in the U.S. are making it really difficult," and, "You know, I'm a little jealous of you, for having left the church entirely when you were a kid."

While I couldn't come up with a reason for hope in preparation of that question, a rather profoundly dispiriting notion came to mind — the sunk cost fallacy. In my own examination of conscience, I wonder, am I still practicing, am I still endeavoring on this way of life within this institution because of the amount of time and energy I have already expended.

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As a kid I was more religious than most and consistently the Gospel spoke to me, specifically the Beatitudes, the works of mercy and the parable of the good Samaritan. But those vivifying elucidations — and commands — of life appear to play second fiddle to other "preeminent" concerns that appear more partisan than Gospel. Further, I've found I have to spend more time and energy trying to understand the words, decisions and examples of church leaders, which reduces time and energy incorporating the Gospel call to holiness in my daily life.

"Be not afraid," the Gospel commands. But I am. I am afraid. I lead nightly prayers with my children, but I fear it is for naught. I go to Mass on Sunday, but I fear that one more horrible homily will ensure that the next time I hear, "Go, the Mass has ended," will be the last I hear of that; even when the pews are full, the church feels rather empty now. I fear that somehow at a table of plenty, there isn't room for me.

Mostly, because my angst stems from church leadership, I fear that maybe it is I, not bishops, who is the lost lamb. I'm fearful of that, not because I'm incapable of repentance, penance or a conversion of heart, but because it seems evident that if I'm the lost one, the bishops would have no desire to bring me back. After all, most Catholics my age that I know are former Catholics. Whatever their reasons for leaving, I've never once heard of the church's shepherds trying to bring them back or ask them why they left or display any concern for their departure. As one bishop once tweeted, it's better to go and be a happy Protestant than an unfaithful Catholic. (If the message is, "Don’t let the door hit you on the way out; don’t bother us anymore," it has been received loud and clear.)

Perhaps it stems from my own stupidity, or better, perhaps it stems from my faith, but it is my hope, my earnest hope, that the next time I see Mr. Wallner that not only will I first respond with honesty, but that honesty will take the form of affirming the Catholicity I have held unto since baptism.

In the meantime, I will continue to endeavor to cultivate this little plot of the kingdom. Good Catholic, bad Catholic, teetering Catholic, whatever the label, the labor of the works of mercy must continue and luckily, no one owns or can withhold the Beatitudes. There's no lie in that.

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 24, 2021-Jan 6, 2022** print issue under the headline: At the table of plenty, is there room for me?.