Opinion
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Fr. Eden Jean Baptiste elevates the Eucharist as he celebrates a Mass for Catholics of Haitian

Fr. Eden Jean Baptiste elevates the Eucharist as he celebrates a Mass for Catholics of Haitian ancestry at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, New York, Jan. 1, 2022, the feast of Mary, Mother of God. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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Massgoers who prioritize the sacred in their worship might be interested to know about a website called Reverent Catholic Mass that offers to help find "reverent and supportive" parishes across the nation. The site includes a map where you can enter your location and find a reverent Mass near you. Those willing to pay $5 a month for a premium membership can access a more detailed map that will show how to find other area resources to support Catholic family life and culture.

But what does it mean to be reverent at Mass?

The Reverent Catholic Mass site has a system for gauging reverence. They even offer a free downloadable "reverence meter" so users can assess their own parishes. Listed criteria for reverence in sacramental life include confession and adoration being offered more than once per week, reception of Communion on the tongue

rather than in the hand, and a limitation on the use of extraordinary ministers.

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At Mass, indicators of reverence, according to the site, include the positioning of the crucifix and the tabernacle in a place of prominence, the offering of Mass *ad orientem* (i.e., the priest facing away from the congregation, toward the altar), the availability of the extraordinary form (i.e., the Latin Mass), only male altar servers, and no engagement of the congregants in question-and-answer routines during the homily. Marks of reverence in the use of music and art include employing only traditional art and music, never allowing folks bands drums, or guitars, and having kneelers positioned in front of statues.

The site also lists keywords that indicate reverence in parish ministries. These keywords include "pro-life," "natural family planning," "homeschool" and "religious liberty." Other keywords apparently designating reverence include "Latin," "hell" and "Catholic medical directives."

There are also indicators that automatically disqualify a parish from being listed on the site. Some of these include altar girls, the tabernacle not being in the sanctuary and the use of drums in Mass.

Some may object and say that all Masses are by nature reverent, because of the Eucharist. However, there is a difference between holy and reverent. While all Masses are equally holy, whether the people attending Mass are reverent or not is a different matter. And though any Mass should suffice for a Catholic seeking to fulfill their Sunday obligation, it can be frustrating to be present in a Mass where the congregation behaves poorly.

The problem with the website Reverent Catholic Mass, and with the Catholic subculture likely to use it as a resource, is that few of the criteria listed have to do with genuine reverence.

Personally, I prefer Gothic architecture and older styles of European music such as polyphony, but this is simply a matter of taste. It is not superior to the taste of those who prefer a more folk-oriented worship, nor to the taste of those who prefer non-Western musical and architectural styles. I am not a better, more virtuous or more reverent person for enjoying classical European aesthetics. But as long as I don't act as though my liturgical tastes make me superior to others, there's nothing wrong with them. The beautiful architecture and music of medieval Europe arose out of a rich, complex and deeply human tradition, and can express a communal orientation toward the divine.

The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston choir performs during a Sept. 29, 2022, Mass at the Co

The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston choir performs during a Sept. 29, 2022, Mass at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Houston. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

However, other qualifiers for reverence listed on the site are morally problematic. Exclusion of girls and women from serving at the altar is not reverent. It is sexist, misogynistic and contrary to the gospel of radical inclusion that Jesus taught. A woman, Mary of Nazareth, proclaimed the glory of God, in the Magnificat. Women were faithful and courageous disciples of Jesus. Women stood by the cross while the men fled. And a woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first to preach the resurrection.

Also morally problematic is the idea that non-Western forms of liturgy, ritual and music are somehow less worthy. Many different worship styles from non-white cultures, especially from the global South, involve the use of drums, as well as folk styles, even dancing. Treating these worship styles as inferior or irreverent is a white supremacist bias, rooted in fear and hate, not in faith and love. The presumption that the presence of women, or traditions from non-white cultures, are less satisfying to God, is anything but Christian.

Additionally, access to elaborate architecture and the availability of trained musicians is often more indicative of financial or geographic privilege than of devotion. Even sacramental accessibility is difficult for some Catholics in more

remote areas, both within the United States and globally. A congregation that partakes joyfully of the sacraments once a year seems to me to be in a better relationship with God than one that partakes weekly in a spirit of arrogance.

Different cultures have different traditions for expressing communal worship, devotion, gratitude, joy, penitence and solidarity. A good liturgy will draw and build on those existing forms, while steering clear of those that do not serve, within that cultural context, the purposes of liturgy. But when a culture fixates on surface gestures and appearance rather than on alignment with the values of the gospel and tenets of the creed, this indicates, not reverence for God, but obsession with appearance and display.

This is especially the case if those who mime reverence in church and later behave in a crude, abusive manner outside of church. How reverent is one, really, if after ostentatiously kneeling to receive Communion one later makes racist jokes online, mocks people for their appearance or laughs at the disabled? I have seen "traditionalist" Catholics do all of these things, both online and in real life. It undermines the supposed reverence of their liturgical postures.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella of the Dicastery for Evangelization burns incense as Pope Francis c

Archbishop Rino Fisichella of the Dicastery for Evangelization burns incense as Pope Francis celebrates Mass marking Sunday of the Word of God in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Jan. 22. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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This is not to say that reverence in Mass does not matter. A few of the criteria on the Reverent Catholic Mass site do seem legitimate ways of measuring reverence. Having the tabernacle with the Eucharist in front of the church, for instance, is more

appropriate, when possible, than keeping it off to the side. Priests who turn homilies into their own Q&A session often risk distracting from the Gospel, making themselves the center of attention, and putting congregants on the spot. I can agree with the Reverent Catholic Mass people about this practice.

Otherwise, what would genuine reverence at Mass look like?

Being reverent at Mass should entail a humble commitment to the values of the Gospel that guide the faithful in imitation of and unity with Jesus. This would mean a communal emphasis on radical welcome and inclusion, and a preferential option for the poor, the marginalized and the less advantaged among us. The music, rituals, homily and parish missions would be selected with the goal of helping all the faithful to see the image of God in all living beings, remembering Jesus' teaching that "whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

A pastor concerned with maintaining a reverent Mass would refrain from setting himself apart from his flock, lording it over the laity or demanding special privileges. While presiding over Mass he would not call attention to himself through authoritarian behavior or ostentation, but keep before him the example of Jesus who taught that those who are leaders must emphasize humility and service. In parish life, the pastor would be open to hearing suggestions, even criticisms, from parishioners. There would be no elevation of celebrities, whether lay or religious, nor special treatment for the wealthy and powerful in the parish. And all of God's children, whatever their gender, would be encouraged to participate in the liturgy.

I too would love to find a truly reverent Mass, where the congregants are united in treating all living things with care and respect, and where human hierarchies and superficial societal trends are subordinated to a fervent commitment to Jesus' Gospel. I'd love it even more if I could find a truly reverent Mass with the kind of classical aesthetics I happen to enjoy. But given the choice between the former and the latter, I'd take real reverence over superficial theatrics or Western supremacy, every time.

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