

“IT’S WHAT WE DO”

Bill Donohue

People often ask me how I got started with the Catholic League. That’s easy: it was due in large measure to Bishop Donald Wuerl, now Donald Cardinal Wuerl, the Archbishop of Washington. When I was a professor at a local college in Pittsburgh, I knew him as my bishop, and he got to know me (so I assume) through my periodic columns in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the local newspaper.

In the early 1990s, Bishop Wuerl invited many prominent Catholics to meet with him at a club in downtown Pittsburgh, and to my surprise, I was included. I was even more surprised when I got there: a priest approached me and asked if I would join the bishop at his table. Why, I had no idea.

Prior to sitting down, I was cornered by the president of the Catholic League, a man of Indian descent. He asked if I would be interested in becoming the league’s new director of communications; the headquarters had moved from Milwaukee, home of the founder, Father Virgil Blum, to Bala Cynwyd, a suburb of Philadelphia, and they were planning a move to New York City. As a native New Yorker, this appealed to me. The Catholic League president had seen me on CNN’s “Crossfire” and thought I would be the right man for the job. Then I sat down to join the bishop.

No sooner had the meal begun when Bishop Wuerl said, “Bill, I would like you to start a new chapter of the Catholic League in Pittsburgh.” (He had no idea of my conversation with the president of the organization.) When he made the offer, he had a soup spoon in his hand, awaiting my reply. The problem was there were two Bill Donohues at the same table (the other Bill, whose surname is Donahue, hails from a great Catholic family in Pittsburgh). With Bishop Wuerl still holding his

spoon, I looked at the other Bill. But he just stared at me. Then I realized that everyone was staring at me. So I said, "Sure, I like to fight." The bishop nodded approvingly.

As it turned out, the job as communications director was never tendered, and the contact I had had with the president was dismaying. Indeed, my experience with the Catholic League was so negative that I told Bishop Wuerl I wanted nothing to do with it. But I did pledge to start a national rival, operating out of Pittsburgh. Once Father Philip Eichner, the newly appointed chairman of the board of directors of the Catholic League got wind of that, he asked if I would consider applying for the opening as the new president of the Catholic League, which had just moved to New York. So that's how it happened.

This is a long way of broaching my review of a new book, *The Mass: The Glory, the Mystery, The Tradition*. But it is only fitting as the book is the work of Cardinal Wuerl and Mike Aquilina. They have worked together for many years; Wuerl is a native of Pittsburgh and Aquilina still lives nearby. Mike is a wonderful person, an accomplished author and one of the Church's most gifted laymen. Cardinal Wuerl is an expert on the Catechism, chancellor of the Catholic University of America and chairman of the board of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. He is a Catholic treasure.

In one sense, practicing Catholics may think they don't need an introduction to the Mass. After all, as the authors say, going to Mass "is what we do." Unfortunately, many practicing Catholics are so used to going to Mass that they treat it as a common exercise, much like getting dressed in the morning. Familiarity, in other words, can breed complacency, even indifference. What this book does, in effect, is throw water in our faces. Short and succinct, it brings the Mass alive by walking us through the liturgy. It is perfect for this Lenten season.

The authors demonstrate, with great felicity, the historical bases of the Mass. The connection between the Old and New Testaments, and the development of the Mass as recounted by the early Church fathers, is explained in a readable and authoritative manner. There is something for everyone, from beginners to veterans, as well as for those who have fallen away but have not shut the door completely. Non-Catholics interested in knowing about the heart and soul of our religion will also find it useful. They may even be motivated to jump ship. I say this pointedly: the absence of a meaningful liturgy in most Protestant churches is glaring.

The origins of the Mass date to the Last Supper, when Jesus gave us the “Paschal Mystery” that marks His suffering, death and Resurrection. The name for the mystery stems from its beginning at Passover (*Pesach* in Hebrew and *Pascha* in Latin). Just as the ancient Jews celebrated their ritual meal, the *seder*, as a testament to their status as the chosen people, Jesus established the Last Supper as a way to celebrate the remembrance of our salvation. In the Passover, the Jews “passed over” from slavery to freedom as they exited Egypt. For Christians, we experience through Holy Communion the new life that receiving Jesus affords.

Wuerl and Aquilina proudly proclaim the Mass as “the greatest event in history, the greatest event imaginable.” And that is the whole point of the book—to validate their extraordinary, yet entirely warranted, claim.

At one level, the Mass is quite simple. It requires three properties: a priest, unleavened wheat bread, and wine. That’s it. But it is not the priest who changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ—it is the Holy Spirit. “Without the power of the Holy Spirit,” they write, “the Mass would not be the Mass.”

The Eucharist, Greek for “thanksgiving,” has been the focal point of the Mass from the beginning. According to St. Justin

Martyr, within fifty years of the death of the last apostle it was celebrated among every race the world over. Moreover, the Mass as we understand it today was essentially the same at that time. This is not a matter of idle speculation. The authors offer an astonishing quote from Justin, written in the mid-second century, that describes in great detail the Mass as it was celebrated. The parallels with what we experience are striking.

There is nothing arbitrary about the Mass; everything has meaning. Historically rooted, we learn that the procession at the start of Mass symbolizes our collective pilgrimage, a journey on the road to heaven. The Sign of the Cross is a ritual summation of our central belief in the Trinity. Because the Church prizes forgiveness, we admit our faults early in the Mass. When we say, "I confess," we make a personal statement: we accept individual responsibility—it is through "my fault." Thus do we pave the way for forgiveness.

God gave us the Old Testament to make way for the New Testament, and that is why the first reading comes from the former collection, and the second from those parts of the latter that are not part of the Gospel, e.g, the Pauline letters. Then it is time to appreciate the readings from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

After the homily comes the Creed. It is, of course, the definitive statement of belief for Catholics. While the Creed is ancient in origin, it developed over the centuries, amidst challenges and heresies. "Every word was chosen carefully, tested, contested, debated, and only then confirmed," they write. And at great cost: "Christians shed their blood and died in defense of subtle shades of meaning in the words chosen for the creeds." We are now closing in on the first part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word.

The second half, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, begins with the presentation of gifts. It is time for prayers, most especially

the *Eucharistic Prayer*, described as an offering. "It is the 'holy sacrifice' of the Mass," the authors proclaim. "It is true that there is only one sacrifice—the self-giving of Jesus on the cross at Calvary." It is the story of the Last Supper that we memorialize.

We are now ready for the consecration, the most profound aspect of the Mass. Then comes the "Our Father," a prayer given by Jesus to the apostles when they asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." After the Sign of Peace and a statement of our unworthiness, we are ready for Holy Communion. Because this is the centerpiece of the Mass, it effectively ends our participation; this explains why the Mass ends so abruptly.

Wuerl and Aquilina understand that to experience the Mass is to appreciate our collective identity as Catholics. When we say the "Our Father," for example, we "recognize that we have responsibilities to each other as members of the same family." This expresses the communitarian side of our religion. But Catholicism does not neglect the individual: we are responsible for our sins, just as we are empowered to affect our salvation.

The communitarian aspect of our religion is an effective rebuttal to the popular refrain, "I'm not against religion, it's just organized religion I disdain." How utterly vacuous. Anything worth saving demands that it be institutionalized, otherwise it cannot survive. Isn't that the purpose of a diary? Our collective ancestral diary is the Bible, and the instructions found in the New Testament. Not to act on them is to dismiss them.

Moreover, there is something powerful when Catholics pray collectively, acknowledging their duties to each other. Sure, we can pray at home, but just as we can watch a game on TV, there is something special about experiencing it live, with others. That is why there is no substitute for the Mass. There are some things in life we just cannot do alone. Indeed, it is

the height of hubris to think otherwise.

When I was a professor, I was the faculty adviser to the basketball and baseball teams, working hard to see to it that the players did not neglect their studies. It was very rewarding. One day, two games into the season, the captains of the baseball team came to see me. They were forlorn: the coach had quit and they had no one to take his place. I did not let them down. But I had no idea what I was in for. I quickly learned how much about the game I took for granted, and how much I really didn't know.

Reading *The Mass* did for me what being a coach did: just as I never watched a baseball game the same way again, my participation in the Mass will never be the same. Do yourself a favor and read it. It will prove to be more than refreshing, it will open your eyes to things that were right in front of you all along, but somehow failed to see. Remember, going to Mass "is what we do." Why not do it right?