

"Sunday Mornings in Ancient Times"

Tears welled up in my eyes — again — at Mass last Sunday. It was not always so. As a former Baptist I used to think the Catholic Mass was a sacrilege and an abomination. How could anyone worship a piece of bread? Really!



However, last Sunday I was overcome with emotion while sitting in an older Catholic church in a relatively poor area of town during a “normal” Sunday Mass. Why? Let me explain.

(Picture: Me on the right with the best dad in the world and brother David after going to Joy Road Baptist Church)

But first I have to take a step back in time to my delightful childhood.

The door of our Baptist church opened and the early arrivers stepped in with well-worn Bibles¹ under their arms and colorful ties snugged up tight around the neck. Children with cute bow ties and frilly dresses were herded in and dropped off at Sunday School. Women adjusted their hats and smiled at all their friends.

It was always the same — enter the church with chattering friendliness accompanied by the organ or piano to set the mood. Everyone takes their place in the padded pews. The pastor steps

¹ I still have my dad’s marked up and notated King James Schofield Reference Bible on my desk. The date in the cover reminds me of his conversion from pagan to Christian in 1954, the year I was born.

up to the front and welcomes everyone, especially any visitors. They are asked to fill out the “Visitor Card” in the pews in front of them. Then we all stand as he opens in a solemn and often wordy prayer. A number is called out and we all grabbed our hymnal and proved we were real Christians by belting out the song, not just the first verse, but verses 1, 2 and 5.

Then came announcements, the doxology and the collection while a soloist sang. I remember at one church they even passed a credit card machine up and down the pews.

Then we were enriched by nearly an hour of preaching with the exercise of flipping from one end of the Bible to the other. I don't recall us ever reading any lengthy selection of Scripture in context. It was usually a thematic study — using verses out of context from one passage then another.



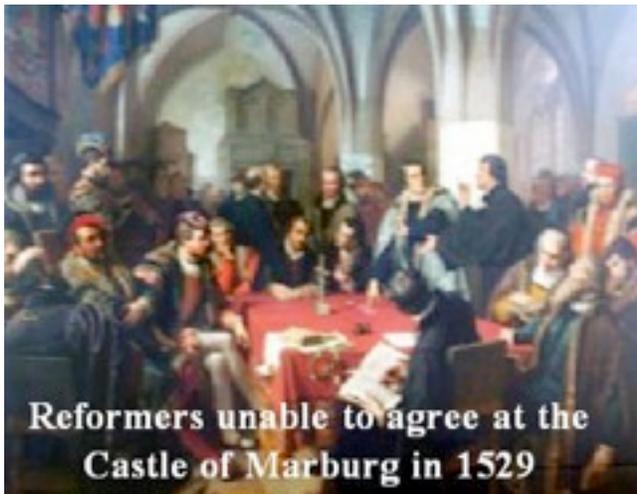
It was usually concluded with an altar call — a passionate, heartfelt appeal to come forward to receive Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. I always wondered about this since I assumed everyone there had already done that at least once, if not many times. No one ever came forward except in the yearly revivals when flocks came forward just to make sure. Then came the closing prayer and a hymn (we sang all four verses) with a reminder of the Sunday service at 7:00 PM in the evening.

It never dawned on me or any other person sitting in the pews to ask what the very *first* Christians did on Sunday mornings. After

all, Christians have been gathering together on Sundays for over 2,000 years. Jesus and the Apostles set something in motion and their immediate disciples followed them in their manner of worship on Sundays.

They certainly had a structure to their “worship service” as is clear from the New Testament and the writings from the first and

second century. The Apostles certainly taught them what to do and how to do it, if only by their example.



(Reformers scattering after inability to agree on the meaning of “This is My Body.” They left saying each other “You are no longer my brother.”)

In my Baptist congregation (and later in other churches we attended like Reformed, non-denominational, Methodist, Calvary Chapel, Presbyterian, New Testament Assembly, Plymouth Brethren, etc.) we had the “Lord’s Supper.” This was done only once every three months tacked on the end of a regular church service.

The broken crackers were distributed on a silvery tray followed by the grape juice in individual mini-glasses (like shot glasses used for whiskey). We were all well aware that nothing happened to the crackers and grape juice during the ceremony. Only the heretic Catholic believed that unseen magic took place. The crackers and grape juice were just symbols to remind us of the the body of Jesus that was nailed to the cross and the blood that resulted from the nails.

Jesus had ordered us to do this so we obeyed and did it — calling it not a sacrament but an ordinance. The ceremony did nothing but remind us of the crucifixion. It was simply a “meal” — meager as it was — to remind us of our Lord’s death. We were always anxious to get out of church and to our real meal at the diner on the way home.

Jesus said, “As often as you do this...” — but in our Baptist church it was interpreted as, “As *infrequently* as you do this...” No one seemed concerned that the Apostles and the early Christians celebrated this ceremony “often” and that it was more than just sharing crackers and grape juice. St. Luke informed us that the very first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).



(Our family being received into the Catholic Church in 1994. Thanks Fr. Fride)

The Apostles and their disciples met frequently to “break bread” which was the earliest term for the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. This was shared no less than weekly (Luke 24:30; Acts 2:46; 20:7).

The daily bread of the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai was called manna. The manna prefigured the Eucharist and we are taught likewise to pray for the Father to provide us with our “daily bread” which certainly refers to the Eucharist as well as our daily provisions.

In addition to the book of Acts and St. Paul's epistles, do we have any idea what the Apostles did on Sunday mornings when they gathered together? Did the early Christians leave a record of what they did on Sunday? Was it similar to the typical Baptist church service?

We are fortunate!
The early Christians *did* leave us a record of what they did, as taught by the Apostles. It would serve us well to read their testimonies.



Why? Well, who can provide us with the best and most accurate idea of what the Apostles taught, practiced and expected the Church to do on Sundays than those who actually learned it from the Apostles?

There is an old axiom, "The water is always cooler and clearer the closer you get to the source."

Justin Martyr (c. 100 - 165 AD) was a pagan philosopher who converted to Christianity. He became a celebrated defender of the Christian faith and was later beheaded as a martyr in Rome in 165 AD. This was only 65 years after the death of the Apostle St. John in Ephesus.

St. Justin wrote to Emperor Marcus Aurelius who was a persecutor of the Christians. He tried to explain to the emperor what the Christians believed and practiced. He attempted to explain Christianity. Maybe if the Emperor understood he would stop killing the Christians.



It would do well for modern Protestants to look beyond their own relatively recent traditions to see what the first Christians did on Sunday morning.

Justin Martyr's voice still resounds through the centuries. His voice can still be heard ringing clearly down through the years, for our ears. He writes,

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

“Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given,

and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.²

This is the first existing description of the Sunday morning worship service, as Protestants usually refer to it. Catholics refer to it as the Mass, or the Eucharistic Liturgy.

Notice first of all that Christians gathered on Sunday mornings. This was something that was expected and even required. They gathered!

Second, they all gathered in ONE place. Does this happen today? Obviously not! On Main Street, in Any Town, USA it is the most segregated hour of the week.

Christians do not gather in one place but in multiple, even competing locations — Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Nazarenes, Methodists, Presbyterians, so-called Non-denominational denominations, and a host of others. In the early Church they all came to *one place!*



In the early centuries Sunday morning began with reading lengthy selections of Scripture, including the Old Testament and the developing New Testament (though the final collection was not codified for another two hundred years or so). They read the Gospels — the words of Our Lord.

² Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (186). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

The readings were extensive and in context. Afterwards, the presider or the priest would exhort the Christians to follow and imitate what the Scriptures taught.

Then they all stood together and prayed, just as we offer our petitions to God in the Catholic Church today, usually ending with “Lord, hear our prayer.”

After the homily and prayers of the faithful “bread and wine and water are brought” to the front of the church. The priest then “offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen.”

This is exactly what happens in every Catholic Church in the world today two thousand years later. The same blueprint. After the Eucharistic prayers the people all say “Amen” and arise to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Then the deacons take the Eucharist to those who were absent. A collection is taken to help the poor.

Is this the Catholic liturgy or the Baptist service?

St. Justin also informs us,

“And this food is called among us Εὐχαριστία [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins [water baptism], and unto regeneration, and who is so living as



Christ has enjoined.

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body..."³



So, what did the earliest Christians do on Sunday morning? The same thing Catholics do today.

I've always wanted to perform an experiment. I want to invent a time machine and snatch a first century Christian away from their past and drop them in a modern Baptist church on Sunday morning. Would they know where they are, or what is going on?

³ Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (185). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

No, they would not. It would be very foreign to them.

Next, I would like to snatch the same apostolic Christian and set them down in a Catholic Church in any town USA. Now would they know where they are and what is going on?

Yes, because it is precisely what they had been doing in the first or second century — every Sunday for their whole lives since their conversion from paganism.

Except for the language, style of dress, type of instruments accompanying the songs, and the style of the building, the “blueprint” and structure of the liturgy — as well as the teaching and belief in the Eucharistic mystery — are the same.

Where did my former Baptist tradition come from? Not from the Bible or the early Church. It came from man-made traditions begun by Martin Luther and a host of other schismatics. These unorthodox and novel ideas originated in the 16th century.

Now back to last Sunday. I again sat at church with tears in my eyes. It has been seventeen years since my family and I all converted to the Catholic Church. Yet, I still am amazed, enchanted, overjoyed, overwhelmed and profoundly grateful.



We are proud of the Catholic Church for keeping the blueprint and living in obedience to her Lord and his Apostles. I sat and listened to more Scripture read, sung and prayed than I had ever experienced in any hour in a

Baptist church. I ate the Body and drank the Blood of Our Lord. I am still transported.

Janet and I sat in Mass this weekend again swept away by the beauty of the liturgy — not because the music was throbbing or the preacher profound — but because it was the same Sunday morning worship that was given to the Church by Jesus and the Apostles and preserved and celebrated uninterrupted for the last two thousand years. It was the same liturgy loved by Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, Peter and Paul, Andrew, James



We were blessed to be participating in the same liturgy that the first Christians celebrated. We were immersed in the same Mass as the Apostles and their disciples. No wonder I had tears welling up in my eyes.

It has happened for seventeen years and I don't expect it to stop — not as long as I keep remembering where I am each Sunday morning.

The Catholic Church is ancient, yet ever young. We partake of the same Body and Blood of Jesus as the first Christians did. We are one body in Christ not only across the surface of the earth but throughout all of time. The Mass is timeless, vital, essential. It is life and light for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

As St. Ignatius of Antioch, another first century Christian wrote — not of himself but as a disciple of the Apostles themselves with

their words still ringing in his ears — “Obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, but [which causes] that we should live for ever in Jesus Christ.⁴

I am so proud and happy to be a Catholic!

My article: The Eucharist in the Fathers of the Church [here](#).

My article: Short Primer on the Mass [here](#).

My Book with 1/3 dealing with the Eucharist in the Bible and in the Early Church [here](#).

My Audio talk “Defending the Eucharist” [here](#).

My DVD “Apostolic Fathers: Handing on the Faith” [here](#).

⁴ Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (57). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.