

CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*

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Cause-or Coincidence?

During a recent visit to my home parish, I had a flashback to the Lent of my youth: lacing up my “combat boots” in the early morning dark to attend daily 6:45 Mass with my parents. Those days, the church was nearly full. Few parishes today have such turnouts, daily OR weekend.

What happened?

Recently, one of my readers expressed his conviction that the liturgical renewal of Vatican II caused the plummeting rate of Mass attendance among U.S. Catholics. When I pointed out that saying “B” was caused by “A” just because “B” followed “A” is a classic logical fallacy, my reader replied he could not believe this was mere coincidence.

One reason I favor Catholicism is its ancient insistence on linking faith and reason; we do not merely believe, but we also like our beliefs to be reasonable. For me, the logical problem remains: coincidence never proves cause-and-effect. But linking low attendance to liturgical renewal faces a tougher problem: there are TOO MANY coincidences.

The percentage of US Catholics who attend weekend Mass has been declining gradually for nearly 45 years. Since 1965, in fact (according to Gallup polls, the encyclopedic *Religion and American Cultures*, and the New York Times’ Peter Steinfels), Mass attendance by US Catholics has dropped from 65%-75% to 25%-35%—although those receiving communion has jumped from 10%-15% to 90%! Forty-five year of declining attendance leaves a lot of time for multiple coincidences. For example:

That decline in Mass attendance has coincided with the demographic shift of US Catholics from city to suburbs. In the suburbs, churchgoing is rarer, and peer pressure to attend is weaker, than it ever was in Catholic “ghetto” neighborhoods.

It also coincided with a dramatic rise in Catholic educational, professional, and income levels. Well-off Catholics are more casual about attendance.

It coincided with the explosion of Sunday commercialism. Where Sunday was once a day of rest, with everything closed, now consumerism competes with our worship.

It coincided with the explosion of organized weekend youth sports (especially girls’ sports). My own family shifted its Mass-going habits when the local soccer league began Sunday morning games to avoid conflict with Saturday CCD!

It coincided with the new “leisure famine.” Today’s Catholics have 1/3 the free time their parents had. Since Americans work more than any western industrialized society, people often feel entitled to stay home on Sunday.

It coincided with the multiplication of leisure-time distractions competing with mass-going. US culture no longer shrinks from Sunday events at times previously reserved for churchgoing and Sunday dinner. Weekend activities like brunch and the NFL double-headers now compete with churchgoing.

It coincided with the phenomenon of “cocooning.” The invasion of home electronics, and especially cable TV, video games and the internet, has made many Americans content to pass time in a “virtual community” in the comfort of their couches.

It coincided with widespread alienation over the birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. From summer 1968 on, increasing numbers of US Catholics distance themselves from Catholic teaching on matters sexual—and weakened their attachment to Church in general, including Mass.

It coincided with the general decline in church attendance among ALL Christian churches with liturgical traditions. In fact, many mainstream Protestant churches have suffered even worse losses. Only evangelical churches offering “entertainment” worship instead of liturgy are thriving.

It coincided with the 1983 Canon Law reform. This allowed Catholics to “shop” for liturgy across parish lines. Catholics have become increasingly choosy about liturgical quality and convenience — and some have simply quit, or chosen other churches.

It coincided with a general secularization of US culture. Churchgoing used to be public evidence of good character and even good citizenship. Now, in many US regions, churchgoing has lost its public significance.

It coincided with the rise in divorce among Catholic families. As more Catholics remarried, churchgoing declined among those who believed (wrongly) they had been excommunicated, and among those who simply felt estranged by from church by being divorced.

It coincided with the massive decline in Catholic school enrolments. Catholic school graduates are better Mass-goers – but they represent a shrinking percentage of the Catholic population.

It coincided with the mass exodus of priests over the celibacy issue, and the subsequent graying of the priesthood in many US dioceses. Fewer, older priests means a growing gap between priests and youth – who are the key group in dropping attendance.

It coincided with the rising shortage of priests. Fewer priests some means fewer Masses, thus less convenience, which requires a higher motivation among mass-goers.

It coincided with the rise of the women’s movement, and the debate over women’s roles in the Church, including women’s ordination. Everyone I know knows someone angry with the Church over women’s roles. Many such angry Catholics attend Mass less, or have quit entirely for the Episcopal Church (yet they still count in “Catholic” attendance statistics).

It coincided with the rise in lay ministry. By 2005 laity had become the majority of parish ministers. The changing place of laity in the church includes millions of laity who now feel entitled to decide they will attend Mass occasionally rather than every week.

It coincided with the rise of women in parish leadership, Similarly, the “feminization” of parish ministry (women now comprising 85% of parish professional staffs) leads some progressive Catholics to pick and choose their mass-going – while alienating some more traditionalist Catholics.

It coincided with the transformation of parish staffs, from the all-priest “drill-team” model to the mixed clergy/lay “ball club” model. This new paradigm for parish leadership has induced many Catholics to re-think their own place in church; many now come for sacraments but not for liturgy.

It coincided with the collapse of “Obligation Catholicism.” The motivational buttons pastors once pushed to gain the compliance of pew-dwelling Catholics—guilt, fear, obligation, and duty—have been unplugged. The fear-driven desire for “fire insurance” filled up pews in previous generations, but polls show that Catholics no longer believe that hell awaits those who stay home – so many do just that.

It coincided with the sex-abuse scandal which touched millions of Catholics even before exploding into public view. Every parish I know, in areas touched by scandal, reports declines since 2002. We don’t yet know where they have gone – or if they will return.

It coincided with the revelation of widespread chronic episcopal malfeasance. Bishops, by hiding abuse, have shattered the confidence of many Catholics, especially younger Catholics, and also proved a convenient alibi for laxity. Now, thanks to hierarchical malpractice, the 25-45 age group can opt out of Mass attendance with a clear conscience.

Logically, none of these coincidences proves what caused our decline in Mass attendance. My reader believes ONE of these—liturgical reform—explains it all. Sociologist Andrew Greeley likewise believed ONE thing—*Humanae Vitae*—caused it all. Personally, I suspect many of the factors above had some impact one way or another, but I have no magic method for singling out ONE coincidence as the “poison pill” that caused it all. Having lived through all these changes, I am very skeptical of any easy, one-cause-fits-all answer.

Ironically, my own first experience of empty churches came as a student in 1960s Europe, *before* the 1970 renewed Mass rite that my reader blames for our losses. I saw churches peopled by a few old ladies and children—churches far emptier than US churches are even today. That Mass rite essentially dated from the Council of Trent. Are we to blame Trent for those empty churches? For me, it’s another coincidence. Coincidences CAN be causes, but proving that requires MORE than the coincidence itself.

Otherwise, our faith ceases to be reasonable.

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