

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Parish from Another Planet

A few years ago my wife and I happened to be in Nashville, and stopped by a local parish for Sunday Mass.

We could have been on another planet.

The liturgy was familiar, of course; the prayers, the hymns, the responses were all the same, and the church had a comfortable, modern feel to it. It could have been any Catholic church built in the 1970s.

But what set it apart—what sets any parish apart, I suppose—was the people.

The men wore shirts and ties. The women wore dresses. The children were wearing what people of a certain age used to describe as their “Sunday best.” I don’t remember seeing anyone in shorts or t-shirts (even though it was May and it was warm). There was a sense of occasion to this Sunday Mass, a feeling that what these folks were doing mattered. It mattered enough that they dressed for it. It mattered enough that they cared how they looked.

It mattered enough that I ended up feeling a little embarrassed that I was wearing blue jeans and sneakers.

When I got back to New York, it made me think twice about how I dressed for church. And it made me ask myself: Why don’t more of us dress the way they do in Nashville?

Of course, I heard the arguments:

“God doesn’t care what I wear...”

“Jesus wore sandals...”

“Isn’t it more important that I’m even at Mass at all?”

“What’s on the outside doesn’t matter, it’s what’s on the inside.”

And, of course:

“Who are you to judge what I wear?”

Good points all. Part of the strange disconnect I felt between Nashville and New York may have been geography. Some people who are smarter than I am have argued that there are actually three kinds of Catholicism in America: the kind practiced in the Northeast, in the South and Midwest, and in the West.

Depending on where you are at any given time, you are encountering different cultures, and different liturgical interpretations. What you find in Nashville, conceivably, is more staid—maybe colored by the Evangelical Protestantism rippling through the Bible Belt—so people are naturally more inclined to dress conservatively.

Significantly, though, what struck me was not the conservative clothing, but the sense of dressing up. And I have to wonder: If people south of the Mason-Dixon line are taking faith seriously enough to put on their best for God, why aren’t we?

Why do we treat church as one more stop between the grocery store and soccer practice? Why do so many of us care more about what we wear to a French restaurant than what we wear to Sunday Mass? And beyond that: Why do we spend the Eucharistic celebration feeding our children Cheerios and leaving empty juice boxes to soiled diapers in the pews?

There *is* a disconnect in the American Church today, yes—but it’s wider than the one between Tennessee and the Triborough Bridge. Too many of us have become unserious about what we believe, what we practice, how we worship and what we pray. We’ve become complacent, or even indifferent. The clothes we wear, I think, reflect that. So does how we choose to behave in a house of worship—the dwelling place of God. (I’m always struck when I walk Queens Boulevard on a Saturday morning and spot my Jewish neighbors heading to temple. They put us to shame. You’d never see anyone heading to synagogue wearing a t-shirt from Hooters. But I’ve seen that, more than once, at Mass.)

Of course, it could also be that we as a culture are increasingly turning every day, even Sunday, into casual Friday.

But I know that when it comes to matters of faith and belief—when it comes to the inextricable bond between this life and the next, and how we choose to worship God—we shouldn’t be treating it casually.

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