

Why Can't Catholics Attend Protestant Services?

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THE QUEEN'S WORK

WHY CAN'T CATHOLICS ATTEND PROTESTANT SERVICES?

WHY CAN'T Catholics attend Protestant services?" The man who asked this question of the Inquiry Hour panel seemed a little belligerent. But that may have been merely a nervous reaction. About 35 years old, he was rather handsome, of moderate build, neatly dressed.

"This is a free country," he went on. "People are equal. They take a liberal view of things. Any Protestant can go to any other Protestant service. He can go to a Catholic service.

"You Catholics, however, must go only to your own." He grew more vehement as he went on.

"You can't attend ours. You put restrictions on your people, which make life in this free country of ours rather difficult. Look at all the problems connected with funerals and weddings and other public church affairs. It's unfair. It's un-American. It's intolerant."

At no time since I joined the Inquiry Hour one year before was I so happy I had associates on the platform. Father Danforth was the historian of our group and Father Sailor the moralist. I taught Church Doctrine. Usually all of us contributed a few comments on each question. An unwritten ruling gave first chance to the one in whose field the question lay. Elements of this question, however, covered all three of our fields.

I hoped one of my associates would take the lead. Not that this question was in itself difficult to answer from the point of Church doctrine; the answer is clear and simple.

But it satisfies few people - and those few are Catholics. It is most difficult to give the type of answer which convinces other Americans of the fairness or correctness of the Catholic position.

If you say: "It's a false worship." They answer: "You're intolerant." If you say that Catholics might be subject to false teaching, they respond: "Don't you educate your people? Don't they know what they believe?"

I recalled the words a priest friend had said to me a week before: "As far as human relations are concerned, it's just about impossible to answer that question." I had agreed with him at the time. Naturally I was happy at this moment to defer to my colleagues.

The Chair Interposes

The chairman of the panel made it a little easier. Friendly and forty-ish, he was a sports-writer on a local daily. He was at once businesslike in his handling of the program and alert in sensing the attitude of the audiences. Instead of designating one of us to begin, he threw the question to the group. "Which of our panel members wishes to answer that one?" Father Danforth forestalled my fears by accepting the challenge.

"This answer, Mr. Chairman, may take longer than the three-minute limit you so wisely put on my long-winded colleagues and myself," Father Danforth said with a smile.

The Chairman noted a nod of willingness from the group. "Take what -5- time you need, Father," he acceded. "This question will be the one exception to a wise ruling."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," Father Danforth resumed. He turned to the questioner. "Please, sir, may I divide this question up? And then make a few qualifications?"

"Surely, Father," the questioner responded, a bit more at ease. He resumed his seat.

Statement Reviewed

"Let's look at your statement that a Protestant may attend any other Protestant service or a Catholic service. I'm sure many Protestants feel that they may in conscience do this. Just yesterday I read that a well-known coach at one of the Big Ten schools was killed in an auto accident. According to the newspaper account, he was a member of the Lutheran Church. His funeral, however, was held at the Methodist Church. There was not enough room in the Lutheran Church.

"Such Protestant people have definite religious beliefs. They usually base their beliefs on something they find in the Bible. They feel, however, -6- that in the worship of God they may join one another or make an interchange of places of worship."

Father Danforth paused, and surveyed the large crowd in the parish hall. Even the group in the gallery seemed intent on his words.

Are These Intolerant?

"Some Protestants, on the other hand, go far beyond Catholics in their refusal to attend religious services of other faiths. A Protestant man of my acquaintance refused to escort his Catholic daughter up the aisle on her wedding day in Assumption Church.

"A devout Protestant lady saw her husband and entire family join the Catholic Church. When several of her sons became priests, she did not attend the ordination ceremonies, believing such attendance against her religious beliefs.

Right to her dying day, she refused to accept any religious administrations from her own dear boys. They sat in the front pews, as her minister conducted the last rites.

"Many of her fellow Protestants, incidentally, criticized her. But not her Catholic neighbors. They admired her steadfast adherence to her religious beliefs." Father Danforth paused deliberately.

"Then there is a class of people," he resumed, pursuing a new direction, "who talk 'tolerance' but don't practice it. They show their true feelings when a member of the family gets interested in another faith especially the Catholic Faith. When that happens, someone had better turn on the air-conditioners in that home."

Father Sailor saw that Father Danforth would welcome an illustration of this point. "Not long ago, Father," he interposed, "I received a letter from a California newspaper woman whose interest in Catholic practice brought her to Mass one Sunday.

"Here's what she wrote: 'It was my misfortune that one of my family saw me coming out of the Catholic Church. I discovered that the family was not indifferent as I had supposed, but opposed to the Catholic religion.'" Father Sailor motioned Father Danforth to continue.

Smiling wryly, Father Danforth remarked: "Not only must I thank my colleague for his fine example, but I must congratulate him. Never before did I know that Father Sailor could keep his mouth closed for such a long time as he has done on this question."

The crowd enjoyed the relaxation of a quiet laugh.

Tolerant or Indifferent?

"A large group of people who call themselves Protestants," Father Danforth sped on, "would seem to recommend a 'common denominator' Christianity. They would want to eliminate all denominational differences whether of belief or of worship. They confuse 'tolerance' with indifferentism. They don't say: 'We're seeking to find out what Christ wanted.' They say: 'It really doesn't matter!'"

"They forget that Christ set down certain beliefs for all. They do not heed St. Paul's words to the Galatians (1 :8) : 'But even if ... an angel from heaven should preach to you other than that we have preached to you, let him be anathema,' - which means cursed.

"Such people think Christ set up a religious supermarket in which we can select our own spiritual supplies and then bring some back after we have tried them and found them not to our liking. Should Catholics attend Protestant services indiscriminately, they would certainly lead many people to think they assented to this false indifferentism."

Father Danforth turned to me. "My colleague on the left has been silent for an amazing length of time." He looked at his watch. "Yes, four minutes. Since he always brings along lots of books and magazines, I'm sure he has something to add on this point."

"To keep the record straight," I retorted, "Let's remember, Father Danforth, you have talked for eight minutes." Then I turned to the audience. "Yes I do believe that I can give another evidence of this false idea that differences of religious belief and form of worship are unimportant.

"Not long ago I read a magazine article about religion on the college campus. It was in this issue." I lifted the copy so that all could see it. -10

The College Chapel

"Here's the story. The chapel at one of America's most famous universities had been built years ago by Protestants. It was generally considered a Protestant place of worship. Recently, however, members of another faith were holding marriage ceremonies there. The Presbyterian chaplain quite justly questioned the propriety of using a Christian chapel for non-Christian weddings. He was publicly condemned in this article.

"Here's what the magazine writer stated: 'What a splendid place Memorial Church might have been for ----- men to collaborate in articulating their shared religious aspirations Instead, the fiat of a Presbyterian preacher ... forbids 25 percent of the student body from marrying under the college chapel's roof.'"

I laid the magazine down slowly. "This writer carried his concept of tolerance mighty far, didn't he? He refused a Protestant minister the right to insist on the Christian character of a Christian chapel." -11-

Midway Recap

The chairman looked out over the audience to see if any objections arose. "Let me summarize what has been said so far," he remarked. "In answer to the statement that any Protestant may attend any other Protestant service and any Catholic service, our panel has made a few qualifications. This statement is generally true. Still, a few Protestants don't hold with it. And many who do, do so not on the grounds of solid religious conviction, but under the mistaken notion that religious beliefs and forms of worship are not really important matters."

Sensing no objections from the audience, the chairman resumed, "I believe, Father, that the questioner and the rest of us would admit what you have so far said. Go ahead to the next point."

Two Important Words

"Let me dispose of another preliminary," Father Danforth spoke directly to the questioner. "You suggest that considerable difficulty arises in inter-group relations because Catholics cannot participate in a wedding, funeral, or other ceremony of a member of another faith.

"Let's look at two things, first the word *ceremony* and then the word *participate*."

"Protestants themselves make the distinction between a worship service and a fellowship hour. The first has a religious content--prayers, hymns, scripture reading, and a sermon--and a religious intent. The fellowship hour may consist of a variety of social programs, perhaps even a potluck supper, with a talk or discussion on a current topic.

"A fellow faculty member of mine at the college, by way of illustration, spent some years behind the Iron Curtain on a charitable mission. When this Catholic lady returned to the United States, she was appalled to find how little American Protestants knew of the persecution their co-religionists suffered in Satellite countries.

"She addressed a Protestant group on this subject. This one stirring talk was followed by invitation after invitation. Eventually she addressed almost every Protestant group in the area. These, of course, were fellowship hours - not worship services. "Catholics can attend social programs sponsored by their Protestant neighbors, as long as it is clear to all that these are not religious services, and the Catholics have a sound reason for attending.

"In the case of a funeral or wedding, the key word is participate. There are times when a Catholic has a social obligation to attend a wedding or funeral in a Protestant church. But he may not take active part in any official capacity in these religious ceremonies.

"My colleague, Father Sailor teaches a course which goes into this particular subject quite deeply. I'm sure he would want to add a few thoughts."

"Right again," Father Sailor came back.

The Baccalaureate

"A problem closely related to this is attendance at baccalaureates and such assemblies. Can the Catholic graduate of a public high school or college take part in such services? - 14-

"For a long time baccalaureates were services under the auspices of the Anglican Church in England. In our country they often differ from locality to locality.

"If the assembly is a civic or academic exercise, a Catholic may take part. If it is a religious service, a Catholic may not take part.

"Here again the tests which Father Danforth just gave can be applied: is the intention of the organizers to have a religious service? Does the ceremony consist of religious activities-hymns, prayers, scripture reading, and sermon? If the answer to both these questions is yes, then the assembly is a religious service!"

Father Sailor turned to me and asked: "Father, would you have a further comment on this matter?"

"Yes I might add this," I offered. "Local arrangements regarding our social obligations in baccalaureates, funerals, and weddings vary slightly from place to place. It is always well to consult the local pastor."

"Thanks, Fathers," said the chairman. "I believe that takes care of the preliminaries. Go ahead, Father Danforth." -15

Core of the Matter

Like a pitcher who had taken his warm-up throws, the priest was ready for the big inning. A stocky square-built man of medium height, he used all too rarely his warm smile. He had served as announcer on a local radio station for several years between college and seminary. He possessed the unusual combination of a definite assuredness and a winning way.

"Now to the core of the matter: 'Why can't Catholics attend Protestant services?'" Father Danforth

grew more intense. "The various parts of the Protestant worship ceremony may be good in themselves. The service may begin with the Sign of the Cross and be offered 'in the name of the Triune God' as a Protestant radio hour of religious music does. The prayers may be the Lord's Prayer and Psalms. Every priest recites many Our Fathers and Psalms every day. The Bible will probably be read. And Catholics gain an indulgence every time they read the Bible. The hymns may be beautiful both in musical score and meaning. Even the spoken message may contain nothing unacceptable to traditional Christian teaching.

"A Catholic's basic reason for not attending Protestant services, however, lies in the significance of the entire ceremony. What is the meaning of Protestant worship? This is the heart and life blood of the issue at hand. Let me use an illustration from American history.

History Helps

"Eleven states of the United States broke from the Federal Union after Lincoln was elected. The citizens of these seceded states now set up a new flag and a new allegiance in defiance of the old. They gave their loyalty first to their own state - South Carolina or Mississippi or Virginia - and then to the Confederacy and to the Stars and Bars.

"The terrible war between the States lasted four bloody years. Finally the Confederacy went down.

"Let us suppose, however, that it had not worked out that way. Instead, that, after several years of frustrated hopes, the will of the North to continue gave way to the conviction that the Confederacy could not be subdued. Peace was made. -17 - Two countries were to exist side by side, where before only one had stood. On the one side stood the United States with its Stars and Stripes flying proudly. Below the Mason and Dixon line was the Confederacy, its Stars and Bars the symbol of its successful defiance of the Federal Government.

"Years go by, first 10, then 15, then 20. The enmities and hostilities gradually subside. No tariff barriers exist between Missouri and Arkansas. No passport is needed to cross the Potomac into what is another country. A spirit of 'live-and-let-live' gradually takes hold.

General Grant Speaks

"In this new spirit of friendliness, a group of Confederates invite General Grant to address their annual reunion .. The Stars and Bars waves over the assembly. After the General's talk, the now legally-recognized Confederate anthem, Dixie, is sung. The entire ceremony concludes with an oath of allegiance to the Confederate States of America.

"What should General Grant and his staff do? Join in this act of attachment to the flag set up in opposition to the flag of the United States? -18 - Sing the song which was the symbol of separation? Join in an oath of allegiance to a country which rebelled against the principle of Union he had fought for? Of course, not! No one would expect General Grant to participate in an expression of allegiance to the Confederacy.

"Courtesy would have demanded, as a matter of fact, that such expressions of loyalty to the Confederacy be had only after General Grant had left the assembly. No one would have expected him to be present, much less to take part in the ceremonies.

"All of this, of course, did not happen. The Union finally prevailed. The South was brought back home by force. 'Dixie' became no anthem of a different country, but a favorite tune of all citizens of the United States. The Stars and Bars does not wave as the symbol of an independent South, but as a 'stirrer-upper' of Southern enthusiasm at the North-South football game. Loyalty to one's state or one's region has lost its character of separatism and disunion. Yet, the supposition helps to explain today's point. The Catholic is in an even more serious situation -19- at Protestant services than General Grant would have been in were he present where the oath of allegiance to the Southern Confederacy was being taken."

It Is the Mass

As Father Danforth paused for a few seconds, the crowd sat in rapt silence. "The next point of our consideration," he resumed, "is this: The Heart of Christian worship has always been the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, begun by Christ at the Last Supper."

Taking up his New Testament, Father Danforth rapidly turned to Luke 22 :14. He read: "And when the hour had come, he reclined at table, and the Twelve Apostles with him. And he said to them, 'I have greatly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you that I will eat of it no more, until it has been fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' And having taken a cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and share it among you; for I say to you that I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God comes.'

"And having taken bread, he gave thanks and broke, and gave it to -20- them, saying, 'This is my body, which is being given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In like manner he took also the cup after the supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which shall be shed for you.'" Father Danforth momentarily closed the Book.

"It is not to our purpose to try to give a complete explanation of the meaning of Holy Mass. Rather, simply to point out some basic facts about it, so that all can understand the point we are discussing today: 'Why can't Catholics attend Protestant services?'

St. Paul Speaks

"St. Paul has a section in the First Epistle to the Corinthians which shows first, that the Eucharist is really the Body and Blood of Christ; secondly, that the Apostles and their successors were empowered to perform this act; thirdly, that it is a sacrifice; fourthly, that it is one with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, and fifthly that the Eucharist must be received worthily."

By that time, Father Danforth had paged to First Corinthians, 11 :24. He began to read: "'For I myself have received from the Lord, (what I -21- also delivered to you), that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and giving thanks broke, and said, 'This is my body which shall be given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'" In like manner also the cup, after he had supped, saying, "This cup is the covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes." Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord.' So much for St. Paul.

"This is still the act of Catholic worship, as it was the act of all Christian worship for fifteen hundred years before the first Protestant uttered his protest. The European ancestors of every American Protestant participated in and believed in this renewal of the Last Supper. "Prayers and Psalms were added to this ceremony. Sometimes hymns were sung and

the Act of Faith was recited. Sometimes processions were held, people carried palms or candles. At High Mass more solemn ceremonies surrounded the main part of the Mass, the Canon, as it was called. But the core of the Catholic worship remained the re-enactment of the Last Supper.

In Protest

"When Luther and Calvin broke from the Catholic Church, they denounced the Catholic worship. One of the best known Protestants called it 'the greatest and most terrible abomination.' It was to be abolished as an offense against God.

"In protest, they set up a substitute ceremony. Basically, it was the preliminary part of the Catholic Mass. It consisted of Prayers, Psalms, Scripture Reading, a Sermon, and sometimes, the Creed. This act of Faith, strangely enough, is still recited in many Protestant Churches, even though it contains the words: 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.'

"This new Protestant ceremony, then, was to supplant the Catholic Mass. In itself it was a denial of the Catholic form of worship, just as the Confederate oath of allegiance was a denial of the former allegiance to the United States of America.

In the very act of participating in a Protestant worship service, then, a Catholic is recognizing as valid the Protestant condemnation of the Act of Worship he received from Christ. He is joining in a protest against Holy Mass. He is denouncing, in fact, what St. Paul and countless generations of Christians believed to be the meaning of Christ's message at the Last Supper. You don't have to believe in the Mass to see how impossible such an action would be for a Catholic.

"That many Protestants have lost their ancestral hatred of the Catholic Mass does not change the character of the Protestant service. It might mean they are indifferent about one of the most important matters of the Christian religion: the proper form of worship of God. Or it may mean that they are ignorant of the historical significance of Protestant worship.

"A Protestant who understood and agreed with the traditional meaning of Protestant worship could not in conscience participate in a Catholic Mass. Nor would he expect a Catholic to attend his form of worship any more than he would expect General Grant to pledge allegiance to the Confederate States of America."

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