

Introduction

Our grandson Eli, like any Old Testament character worth his salt, arrived amidst a whirlwind of panic and exhilaration. His mother Andrea had labored long and hard—twenty-seven hours—but in the end, his big head was too much for her. As I waited for my son-in-law Josh to tell me that the emergency C-section was over and everyone (please God, may it be so) was fine, I thought about Josh and Andrea’s wedding three years before, the wedding of these fine young people who were now about to meet their big-headed first child, and what Josh had confided to me the night before the marriage ceremony. “I wish,” he said, “that we could ride in on a goat cart while some bard chanted our family lineages.”

“Really?” I said, momentarily stumped by the question of how we’d get our hands on a cart-trained goat at this late hour. “Why?”

“Because this marriage is not just about Andrea and me. It’s also about everyone who came before us. I just feel that they should be acknowledged somehow.”

He had a good point, I had to admit, and though we quickly got swept up in last-minute preparations and forgot all about the goat, much less the generational chant, it

had come back to me when Andrea was still in early labor and they were trying to distract themselves by finally settling on a baby name. It was already a given that this child's moniker would honor at least one grandparent on each side of the family, though they both agreed that the appellations they chose should not be identical to but simply evocative of the names of their beloved elders. If it was a boy, they finally decided, he would be Eli Robert in honor of Josh's paternal grandfather, Edwin (an Eastern-European Jew who worked in the Manhattan garment industry), and Andrea's paternal grandfather, Bob (a German, Lutheran dairy farmer from Ohio).

Already then, little Eli, if that's who the baby would turn out to be, was firmly embedded in an ongoing, multi-generational family story. He would not arrive in this world as a self-contained being stuck with the task of creating a community for himself. He'd already been placed. He had kinfolk and a culture.

THE MASS AS FAMILY STORY

On the simplest level, the Mass is a reenactment of a similar, though considerably more involved, family story. Jesus, whose words of farewell to his beloved compatriots on the eve of his youthful death became the Eucharistic words of institution, did not come out of nowhere. He was a faithful Jew of the first century AD. People knew his parents. They knew the town in which he grew up. If there had been something like a modern high school back then, they would have known what sports he played, and,

more importantly, how good he was. He was that familiar to them. So familiar, in fact, that a sizable number of his neighbors and close relatives could not imagine a bigger role for him than carpenter, and certainly not the identity of wandering teacher and healer that he seemed to be taking on once he turned thirty. Because he was so firmly placed within his own mostly rural culture, a milieu in which people worked long hours in the fields or on the water simply to put food on the table, many of them saw his public antics as presumptuous and possibly mad. Who did he think he was? Could anything good come from Nazareth? (See John 1:46.)

Yet their multi-generational family story had actually prepared them well for the arrival of someone like him. Faithful Jews, they'd been waiting for centuries for the long-prophesied one who would be mighty enough to defeat God's enemies and create permanent peace on earth. They were convinced they would recognize the great warrior king so clearly described in Psalm 21. They were sure they would know when the descendent of the legendary King David, destined to rule in perpetuity, finally appeared before them. True, these prophecies were ancient and fragmentary, difficult to comprehend, but together they formed a mosaic-like but compelling portrait—though not, after all, of a ruling dynasty but increasingly of a specific person: the Messiah, also known as the Christ.

The first half of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, takes us back to the very beginning of this family saga with an opening reading from the Old Testament (except

for Easter Sunday and the seven weeks following when the First Reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles). Within the pages of the Old Testament, we find ourselves in truly ancient territory. Most of the Old Testament did not take written form until about 2,500 years ago, but it draws on oral history that goes back to the dawn of time, opening with the great creation story of Genesis, during which God makes his first covenant with the human race. A *covenant* is not, as we might imagine today, simply a contract or legal arrangement that is invalidated when one of the parties violates it. It is a permanent alliance, a binding together, a new blood relationship. And it extends to everyone it represents, including succeeding generations.

Even though the biblical covenants (there are six of them) are permanent, not all of them are unconditional. They can result in both blessings and curses. Thus the Bible story is not conflict-free. Human beings created in the image of God, which means created with the capacity for real choice, regularly choose to go their own willful ways instead of honoring the terms of the covenants. Adam and Eve, for example, manage to violate in record time the simple requirements of this first basic agreement. Yet one of the great themes of the Bible is God's remarkable patience. Over and over again he offers his unfailing love and mercy to erring mankind. Over and over again he offers to bind himself in new and ever more complex ways to the human race.

Key to this family history is the arrival on the scene about four thousand years ago of a Sumerian nomad called Abram of Ur who, much to his amazement, is called

by God to become the father of a “great nation,” a people chosen out of all others to become a special sign for the world (Gn 12:2). According to the offered terms, if Abram agrees to leave his homeland and strike out for a new land that God will give him, God in turn will bless him with as many descendants as there are stars in the sky (Gn 15:5). And though it takes many years and Abram (now called Abraham) and his wife Sarah are far beyond the age of childbearing when it finally happens, God does indeed honor his covenantal promise with the birth of their first son, Isaac.

Five hundred years later, Abraham’s many descendants—by now a vast tribe known as the Hebrews—are offered yet another binding agreement through their leader Moses, this time to anchor themselves in a moral and spiritual set of laws that will enable them to finally become God’s sign of love and goodness in the world. In return he will lead them back to their lost homeland, protect them from the depredations of their enemies, and honor them with an important role in his unfolding plan for humankind. The first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Pentateuch, comprise this Law or Torah, which is still the moral anchor for contemporary Jews.

In the Mass, the Old Testament reading is followed by a cantor-led recitation or singing of one of the psalms. The traditional Hebrew word for psalms is *tehillim*, meaning “songs of praise,” though some of these are labelled *tefillot*, meaning “prayers,” and a number of them are attributed to King David himself, an Abrahamic descendant who, thanks to yet another divine covenant, reigned

in Jerusalem a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. There David's son, the famously wise King Solomon, built the first Temple. Some of the psalms were used in the earliest Temple liturgies, which means that psalm singing has been part of Jewish practice for nearly three millennia and part of Christian worship for two.¹

Next in the Liturgy of the Word comes a reading from the Epistles, or the official letters of the apostles. Acting as both preachers and missionaries, the intrepid apostles Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Thomas, and James spread the good news of Christ's sacrificial and redemptive intervention far and wide. They traveled to the modern-day Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy and, by long tradition, Africa, India, and Ukraine before they died, often as martyrs. Almost invariably, the writer of the epistle for the day is Paul, the one disciple who never saw Jesus in the flesh but who became his greatest and most far-ranging apostle. Perhaps because of my own dramatic conversion experience, or perhaps because we share the same name, I have always felt a special kinship with Paul.

Finally, in this first half of the Mass, we hear from Jesus himself—the pivotal figure in this long line of descendants out of Abraham and the living sign of the last and most important covenant between God and man—during the Gospel reading of the day. Though the writers vary (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) the sermon, parable, or event is frequently connected in some deep and often riveting way with the Old Testament reading, the Psalm, and occasionally with the excerpt from an Epistle. Nothing in the Liturgy of the Word, in other words, is accidental. Nothing

“just happens.” Everything converges to a specific point in this unparalleled family saga, which Catholics believe is the Great Story, the Story of the Human Race.

Like all good stories, this one has a beginning, during which we find out what has precipitated this sometimes confusing jumble of events; a middle, in which characters collide and conflicts build but everyone keeps moving forward toward some as-yet-unknown conclusion; and an end, in which the conflict is finally resolved and we see the overall purpose of the story. The Bible does not, in other words, present a random universe. Neither does the Mass. They tell us that the earth and all that is in it was deliberately created out of nothingness by God. They tell us that he designed humankind in his own image and likeness. They tell us that throughout the course of history he singled out individual human beings—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David—for specific, important tasks and that because they were free beings, they were free to turn him down, which some of them promptly did.

But most important of all, they tell us that untold centuries after God’s first ill-fated covenant with the human race, we still arrive in this world with the same inborn purpose as did those who have preceded us: to become participants in God’s divine life. They tell us that we have a natural end to our time here on earth, a point toward which we are constantly, even if unconsciously, striving, even when it seems that all we are doing is failing. And when we choose that which leads us away from this natural end, we cannot help but suffer. Not because God turns on us and makes us pay for our rebelliousness, but

because we are in some deeply consequential way disregarding the person we are meant to be, the person we long to be, the person God is so patiently waiting for.

THE LONG-ANTICIPATED INFANT ARRIVES

My son-in-law Josh was, if anything, more exhausted than I was. Neither of us had slept, eaten much, or had a moment to think during the hours of Andrea's difficult labor. We had dark circles under our eyes. We smelled bad. We no longer made sense. But when he tracked me down in the empty labor room, he was ecstatic. "It's Eli!" he said. "And he's fine!"

And soon the nurse brought him in, great-grandson of Edwin, great-grandson of Bob, and now the newest member of our family. His head was a little large, true, but the doctor assured us he would soon catch up to it. His eyes, despite the long hours of birth trauma, were unbelievably bright. His birdlike mouth kept opening and closing in what appeared to be utter bedazzlement. His mother, despite her exhaustion, was nevertheless beaming with grateful joy. He was here. He was fine. The long-awaited infant had finally made his appearance.

Mother and child were installed in the bed, the lights were dimmed, and the large cast of supporting characters—doctor, nurses, midwives—said goodnight and left. It was time for me, the grandmother, to head for my hotel room, find myself a large glass of celebratory red wine, and crawl under the blankets for a long-overdue sleep.

What would they do, this new family, on their first night together? How would they handle it?

I should have guessed. Andrea tucked Eli into the crook of her arm. Josh lay down in the bed beside them. And then he held up a children's book—I can't, for the life of me, remember which one—and said, "Eli, my son, let me read you a story."

Gathering

The Opening Processional, the Sign of the Cross, the Greeting

As usual, we pull into the parking lot at St. Patrick's via the exit rather than the entrance lane, which is the best way to position ourselves near the actual exit, between Bill and Lynnette's modest SUV and Joe and Cindy's spotless white Acura. Every week after Mass, we head for Francisco's Country Kitchen or CJ's with these four good friends. Over eggs, fried potatoes, and homemade muffins, we mull over such hot topics as what's playing at the Fair Oaks Theater, when the next 20-percent-off sale at Miner's Ace Hardware is supposed to be, and how it is that Congress can't even pass a budget anymore.

Would we have met our breakfast buddies without St. Patrick's? Maybe. It's a small town, after all. But our bond is based on more than the fact that the six of us live in Arroyo Grande. First (with the notable exception of Mike, who is, ahem, older), we all graduated from high school around 1970. This means we are members of a generation that for the most part bailed out of "organized religion"

shortly after we got our driver's licenses. Second, we are Catholics in an era in which that's not exactly a social plus. To those outside the Church, Catholicism tends to be read as authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, and puritanical at a time that values egalitarianism, feminism, inclusivity, and moral tolerance. The third and maybe most important reason for our bonding, however, is that we are part of the early morning "crew," meaning that most Sundays, most of us are fulfilling some kind of lay ministerial role during the Mass.

HELPING OUT AT THE MASS

Lay assistance of this nature is relatively new, at least in the last thousand years. Older Catholics can easily remember a time when the only people on the altar were priests and altar boys in lacy surplices. The Second Vatican Council, launched in the early 1960s by Pope John XXIII, changed all that. One of the key documents of the Council was *Lumen Gentium*, or "Light of the Nations," and in it Pope Paul VI, elected after the death of Pope John while the Council was still in progress, tackled an issue that had been simmering for a long, long time: namely, the question of what role the people should play in the Mass. Various attempts at involving the laity had been tried out by various popes and liturgists for centuries, but ultimately, the experiments had always led to the same conclusion: "For the Christian multitude," in the words of Joseph Jungmann, "the Mass should . . . remain wrapped under a veil of mystery."¹

Yet before the chasm between laity and priests that began opening up in medieval times, things had been different for the people. And along the way, voices were raised, imploring the Church to reestablish that earlier and more intimate connection between lay folk and their worship. A good century before the Second Vatican Council, for example, Father Antonio Rosmini argued that “the people should be actors in the liturgy as well as hearers.”² In 1897, the official prohibition on translating the Ordinary (the order, or established elements of the Mass) from Latin into the everyday language was quietly dropped by Pope Leo XIII.³ And the movement toward increased lay participation continued to pick up momentum until Vatican II finally dealt definitively with the issue.

Which means that nowadays, it takes a lot of Catholics to celebrate the Mass. As we approach the narthex, I can see Bill, pharmacist by day and greeter by calling, occupying his usual position by the side door. Along with welcoming people to Mass, he and Joe serve as ushers, which means they collect the offering, then tally it up and stash it away in the safe. Making sure the money gets where it is supposed to go is a big responsibility in any diocesan institution—and our own diocese, which includes the four counties of Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo, is a large one, extending nearly two hundred miles along the coast.

Inside the main doors, Lynnette is standing with a short line of fellow greeters. A pharmacist too, Lynnette grew up on a dairy farm in what we Central Coasters refer to as “The Valley,” and she and Bill often head there

after breakfast at Francisco's to check up on her dad, the thoroughly Portuguese Manuel, who is now in his eighties and stubbornly, bowleggedly, still farming. I can see Pat and Larry, two of my fellow Lectors, bent over the Sunday Lectionary (the book of readings) studying their particular passages for the day. Larry, who by his own admission is beginning to deal with a few age-related challenges, prefers to be Lector #1, which means he will read the excerpt from the Old Testament. Pat, a former junior high school physical education teacher and incredibly in-shape grandmother of seven, will read from one of the Epistles. She will also read the Universal Prayer, or Prayer of the Faithful—public petitions on behalf of the global church, the world, the nation, and the local church, including the sick and those who have recently died—which is no doubt why Larry prefers the position he prefers; in our ethnically diverse church, surnames can be a bear, and he would rather screw up three-thousand-year-old Hebrew names than those of people he knows and loves.

Right beside Larry and Pat, the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, affectionately known in laid-back Arroyo Grande as the "EMs," are signing in and hanging their big wooden crosses around their necks. For the crowded 7:30 a.m. Mass at St. Patrick's, we usually need at least eight of these folks, who assist the priest during Communion by distributing the Body and Blood of Christ. Though under normal circumstances I love my EM job, today I am guiltily relieved not to be on the schedule. Extraordinary Ministers are supposed to be reverent, dignified, and, most of all, warm. We are supposed to look

those who are receiving directly in the eye. We are supposed to project the love of Christ, no matter who might be staring back at us. And frankly, I'm not sure I'm up to that today.

In the midst of the milling crowd of EMs stands an already-robed Peter, recently voted altar-server-most-likely-to-be-bishop-someday. One of his many jobs this morning is to carry the heavy processional cross, a gold crucifix on a long pole that will be secured to a stand behind the altar. Something else I never saw during my Lutheran childhood—the corpus, or body of Christ, depicted hanging on the cross. Crucifixes came into wide use during the thirteenth century in response to the medieval focus on Christ's Passion. They are standard in Catholic churches today as a reminder of Christ's atoning act of sacrifice.

Beside Peter stands Rafael, a handsome young seminarian from St. John's Seminary in Camarillo who is doing his internship at St. Patrick's this summer. Like other would-be priests, Rafael is required to have an undergraduate degree, two years of additional philosophy, and four years at a major seminary before he can be ordained. Part of his training is to serve in a parish for a significant amount of time before ordination. Because Rafael is here to help Peter serve, there's no need for lovely, long-haired Brooke this morning. Another Vatican II-initiated change, rooted in *Lumen Gentium*: the role of altar server is no longer strictly limited to guys. Though there is still some controversy around that since altar serving has long been

the gateway to the seminary, and in the Catholic Church women are obviously not eligible for ordination.

THE WOMAN QUESTION

Some of my non-Catholic friends are utterly appalled by this. How can you belong to a Church, they ask me, that so devalues women? Doesn't it drive you crazy?

I listen, wondering if they are talking about the same Church that has canonized hundreds of women and made four of them Doctors of the Church, "super saints" whose writing shapes official doctrine. I wonder if they are remembering the myriad nuns and sisters and abbesses and desert mothers who have acted as spiritual leaders through the centuries. I wonder if they've forgotten Mary. I'm guessing they probably don't realize how many roles women do fill in the Church: directing religious education programs, writing books, giving retreats, administering outreach programs to the hungry, serving as Lectors and Extraordinary Ministers, and acting as spiritual directors.

I clear my throat. Actually, I say, I would be incredibly disappointed should the Church ever decide to ordain women priests.

Stunned silence. My friends give me horrified looks.

I shrug apologetically. Look, I say. I grew up Protestant. The denomination in which I was raised was one of the first to ordain women. And I've known a number of wonderful women pastors—intelligent, dynamic, warm, highly educated. It's not a question of professional qualifications. Not even remotely.

Then what, my friends rightly demand, can it possibly be?

A couple of things, I tell them. Catholicism is totally rooted in the two thousand years of Judaism that gave birth to it. And Jewish religious practice originated in divine law and was overseen by a set-apart priestly male caste called the Levites. None of that changes in the New Testament even though Jesus had plenty of committed female followers he could easily have tapped for leadership roles if he wanted to. Yet though he makes it clear that men and women are spiritual equals, he chooses a man to take his place when he is gone. He says, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld will not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). And he then proceeds to bestow divine power on this man Peter by saying to him, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

Every Catholic bishop, I tell my increasingly dubious-looking friends, has become a bishop through the laying on of hands in a line of succession that goes back to the original apostles. The bishop's job is to impart the Holy Spirit to priests during ordination, which maintains this apostolic lineage. The Eastern Orthodox do it the same way. Both branches of the ancient church believe that not only would they be second-guessing Jesus' intentions if they were to start ordaining women, they also literally have no authority to do so.⁴