Sunday Mornings

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For many people looking back, Sunday mornings are associated with the tradition of their family going to church. That is the case for me, but it was much more. My Dad was raised Catholic in an Eastern European immigrant family and grew up worshiping in a Catholic school and in a Slovenian church in Indianapolis. My Mom was raised in rural Indiana and was a member of the Church of the Brethren, established in 1827 near Ladoga, Indiana. The Indiana Brethren derived from the German Baptist Brethren, part of the "Dunkard" tradition which practiced baptism by immersion. My parents' religious foundations and upbringings could not have been more different. Mom agreed to convert to Catholicism as a condition of their marriage, which occurred in 1946. Key to that conversion was the promise to raise the children as Catholics.

We lived on a farm out in the country and attended St. Paul's Catholic Church in Greencastle, Indiana. The red brick church seated 120 people and at that time only had one Mass on Sunday mornings at 9:00 am. To successfully accomplish the milestones of First Communion and Confirmation, we attended catechism classes on Saturday mornings for two years. These classes were taught by nuns from Indianapolis who prepared us for these sacraments. The classes were a bit dry and hard to understand when they sent a German nun.

One of our classmates, Louis Erpelding, provided entertainment for us. Once we practiced walking down the aisle of the church to receive first communion. We were told to put our hands together in prayer and point them in the direction we wanted to go when we died, i.e., Heaven. Louis was in the lead and pointed his hands downward towards hell. Soon, we were all doing it.

Another time we were practicing our first confession. Most of us were struggling to identify "appropriate" sins to confess to over our short lives. When it was Louis's turn, he went into the confessional and loudly confessed to killing his parents and strangling his dog. The nun yanked him out by his ears, which, by the way, were quite large. I think she beat him. He also convinced us that it was all right to drink the holy water at the entrance of the church. I am not blaming Louis, but it was a bit hard to take it all seriously in that environment.

The four of us did successfully complete those rituals. My Mom was the driving force in accomplishing those important Catholic milestones. She was also the one largely responsible for getting us to Mass on Sunday mornings. We had to drive five miles and secretly hoped we would be delayed by the freight train that often crossed in our path.

We counted the slowly moving train cars and often got a wave from the conductor in the caboose as he went by. Sometimes Dad would tell us about hitching rides on trains as a young boy in Indianapolis. I think his longest trip was to Chicago and back. All this meant less time in church for us.

We always arrived late and were ushered to the very front row, always on the same left side. I liked that as we had front row seats to all of the mysterious thing the priest was doing. When I was really young, I thought that all the people on the right side of the church were all those other religions, Baptists, Methodists, Mormons… Mass was in Latin and we each had a small leaflet that had Latin text on one side and on the matching page, it was in English. It was fun to try to match Latin roots with English words. In spite of all of those catechism lessons, Mass was largely a mystery. Our priest, Father Call, wore a long black cassock and smoked cigarettes using a long cigarette holder. He just added to the mystery.

At some point after we all had been confirmed, my Mom stopped going to church with us. I remember her saying that her Mom had always told her that her religion was just as good as his. It fell on my Dad to get us organized and to Mass, although still always late. At that point, Sunday mornings took a bit of a turn and became my favorite day of the week. After Mass, we would always stop on the way home at Monnet's Grocery, a small country store, to get a Sunday paper and some milk or bread. Earlier, my Dad would have given us two nickels to put in the donation basket as it passed by us. It was another one of his little moral lessons for us because it was so easy to only put only one nickel in and keep one to buy penny candy at Monnet's. It was obvious where we got that candy money as we did not have allowances.

After our stop at Monnet's Grocery, we would head off to the Greencastle Dump on the edge of town. The dump was managed by an older man named Foxy. He was bearded, scrawny, and dirty. The dump was composed of hills of burning and smoldering trash. Dad would turn us loose to explore while he talked to Foxy. We promised him we would not get dirty as that would clue my Mom into what we were really doing Sunday mornings. We might find something small to take home or just wander in wonder through the large piles of trash. It was the best time. I think my Mom finally figured it out as we smelled when we came home.

We attended Mass with my Dad until we each left for college. We experienced the awkward transition to English Masses after the seminal Vatican II Ecumenical Council. At some point, I started standing in the back of the church instead of joining my family in the front pew. I would often look at that bowl of holy water that just had 120 hands dipped in it and wondered how we could believe Louis when he said it was all right to drink it.

Recently, a very dear University friend died, and a Funeral Mass, and Celebration of Life were held on the University of Notre Dame campus. My best friends from college (The Augusta Five), Anne, Katie, and Nancy were there with me to celebrate Mary's life. The Mass was held in the beautiful Notre Dame Basilica of the Sacred Heart and Dave, Anne's husband, served Mass. The priest who conducted the Mass had married Mary and Bill in the same place years earlier. The only way I can describe it was that it was the most Catholic experience I have had in over 60 years. My friends all had more consistent, traditional Catholic upbrings. I found myself a bit envious of the deep faith of my friends and guessed that it gave them comfort in losing Mary. It felt that way during the Funeral Mass.

Whatever happened over all those Sunday mornings as a child, I somehow missed developing a deep, Catholic faith. Again, I cannot blame Louis Erpelding or trips to the dump. Something in all those experiences left me spiritual, but not truly Catholic like I saw in my friends. I have always been comfortable in how I evolved spiritually. That day, I felt free to borrow a bit of faith when I needed it most from my friends.