



Sneaking into church

My most recent column – “A View from the Pew” told of how Carolyn observed a troubled gentleman in church and wondered what burden he might be carrying. I reflected how, as a priest, we rarely get an opportunity to experience the view from the pew and get a different perspective on life and troubles in the Sunday pews.

On a recent trip to Mississippi, I did get an opportunity to view Mass and participate in it from the pew. Seated in the second last pew with some friends, we attended the 8 a.m. Mass at one of our diocesan parishes. The last time I experienced such was twelve years earlier with my niece who was then seven years old. I recall that, toward the end of that particular Mass, she turned to me and asked, “How much longer is this going to take?” Obviously, she was impatient. My recent view in the pew experience was with that same niece, now nineteen years old, and about to attend college for the first time.

We attended at one of my former parishes. As we entered, a lady handed out bulletins and opened the church door for us. I recognized her but, to her, I was just another stranger.

Kneeling in the pew prior to Mass, my eyes glanced around the church. I recognized a few persons that I had known in the last century. Then a thought struck me, these people have really gotten old. Then, I realized I, too, have gotten older, but somehow that did not register at first. It seems stranger that so often, when we meet someone we haven’t met in a few years and conclude that they have gotten older, we often fail to realize that we, too, have gotten older. Maybe, the absence of not seeing them for a few years allows one to judge the person from the last time we met them to the present, whereas, in the intervening years, we have met ourselves daily but are slower to admit changes in ourselves.

Mass began with an opening hymn but few worshippers seemed to join in include myself. Later, it was time for the homily. Instinctively, as the priest began it, I looked at my watch and wondered how long he might preach for. I seemed to go through the same ritual at Masses celebrated by bishops; wondering how long they might preach. I know for myself, I never time my homilies but I hope I continue to be short-winded rather than long-winded. Just in case you are wondering, the priest’s homily lasted twelve minutes.

Communion time arrived and we approached the altar to receive. In a parish, I could instinctively know who was coming up to Communion according to where they sat in church. Later on, I might have told someone who wasn’t at church on a particular Sunday that I missed them. Obviously, they wondered how I could know they were missed. Then they realized we are all creatures of habit even where we sit in church.

I hoped the person giving out Communion didn’t recognize me as they were concentrating on the task at hand. I hoped my anonymity was still intact. Following Mass, I found out otherwise.

As I reflect on that Sunday morning experience as a priest in the pew, I got a different perspective from that vantage point. Sitting in the second last pew, I could scan the audience and notice the body language, level of participation; enthusiasm or lack of it without anyone noticing. Everyone seemed to go to Communion. Obviously, some rushed out immediately after receiving Communion. The greying profile of the audience seemed to be peppered with a few younger couples with children and I wondered what kind of church would remain after the greyed folks had joined a more heavenly audience in the future.

Now, as a retired priest, I don’t have any appointments. I don’t have to try and decipher anyone’s maze of questions or problems. Physical labour has replaced mental acumen. Open ended days have replaced schedules except for Sunday Mass. Then, I assume my former role of presiding over a community that are neighbours. One consolation I have is that that I can bring the local weekly happenings of trials and tribulations, encounters and entertainments, gossip and grievances to the altar.

Will I ever get the chance to be a participator rather than a presider; a back seat warmer rather than a chair embracer? I hope so. In the meantime, I will seize whatever opportunities I can to sneak into church on a Sunday morning.