

Senior Life: Daily Mass: The spiritual heartbeat of the community

Rita Klarer | May. 27, 2009



Eucharistic ministers Charlie and Iona Lamb with Fr. Gerald Waris during daily Mass in the chapel of St. Patrick Church (NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Before the sun is up, a group of about 35 men and women start their day with rituals they have treasured for years. For some, their first cup of coffee is accompanied by meditating on the scripture readings assigned for the day in the Roman Lectionary. For others it is just quiet time or a set routine of prayers. But this is preliminary to the main event, coming together at the local parish church for morning Mass.

Most of them are at or beyond retirement age, so there is no need to watch the clock or worry about being somewhere else. Younger members of the group have come to accept this slower pace and say they find it restful, conducive to prayer. Joining them is Fr. Gerald Waris, their parish priest at St. Patrick Church in Kansas City, Mo. This group of people and this time of day are spiritual home base for him. His day also begins with personal prayer and reflection on the day's readings he will share with his small prayer community at Mass.

When he was a seminarian at Missouri's Conception Abbey, Waris said he grew to love the sung choral office of that Benedictine monastic community. "It gave focus and meaning to everything else that happened that day."

With his ordination for the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, he was assigned to the first of many parishes. He discovered that he missed the monastic communal prayer. He began his day praying privately his Breviary, the shortened (abbreviated) version of the Divine Office sung by the monks.

Over the years, the Mass became his communal prayer, on Sundays with the whole parish and with the small circle of faithful who attend Mass during the week. Though small in numbers, when they gather this group represents the entire parish. Personal needs and intentions give way to the prayer of the whole church, joined to the celebration of the Mass all around the world.

After 40-plus years in the priesthood, Waris is at home with this praying community. As pastor, he has shared every intimate aspect of their lives. He knows the common experience of aging and limitation as he stands at the altar on his two knee replacements. He has helped open his parishes to the larger world of concern for social justice, especially through sister parish links to churches in El Salvador, to serving at a local Catholic Worker

House that provides a nightly meal to hundreds of people in the central city.

It all begins here, at the altar, where Word and Eucharist blend personal prayers with the needs of the world and where the death and resurrection of Christ are woven into the patterns of daily life. The community prays for loved ones, for those who are ill, in the hospital, for those absorbing the death of a spouse, a brother or sister. They share joys -- a birthday, a new grandchild, recovery from illness, good test results. No one in this faith community need face a crisis alone. If someone is having surgery, the group surrounds them with prayer and a special anointing. Tears and laughter are regular signs of the bonds that form here.

Daily Mass has become the quiet, steady spiritual heartbeat of the community. As more parishioners or visitors discover this, they are welcomed warmly. On certain days, preschool children come with their teacher, an added bump in energy and joy for everyone. The future is here.

If anyone is absent, others will check to find out why. When traveling or on vacation, members stay in touch by attending Mass elsewhere but admit that it's not the same. The same Mass, but not the same sense of community. They return saying, "It's good to be home." One Mass-goer echoes the experience of so many others: "It's the best way to start my day."

Ursuline Sr. Rita Klarer is a member of St. Patrick's community and has served in parish, school, hospital and prison ministry for many years.

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