Why do Americans go to Church?

I have many fond memories of attending church with my family on Sunday mornings throughout my childhood. It is worth noting that at that time my enthusiasm for going to church was grounded more in the donuts that were served afterwards than what was happening at the altar. Nevertheless, that weekly family tradition formed me in such a way that attending church has become a priority for me. To this day, you can find me at the Last Chance Mass at SJV every Sunday night like clockwork, although I will admit that part of the reason I enjoy this Mass is because of the juice that is served afterwards…some things never change.

My own motivations for attending church on Sunday lead to a broader question about American society in general: Why do we go to church? Is it the result of years of family tradition? Do we feel it is a moral obligation? Or is it simply the result of one’s need to feel closer to God? It is a topic that has intrigued experts in psychology, sociology, and theology alike and one that I hope to shed some light on in the course of this article.

According to a 2007 Gallup poll, 35% of Americans attend church on a weekly basis, while 55% of Americans attend at least once a month. Of that slight majority, 23% said that they attend for “spiritual growth and guidance” and 20% percent said that they go because it “keeps them grounded/inspired.” Smaller percentages reported that they attend church to worship God, to connect with their community or because of their own family traditions. When comparing Protestant to Catholic reasons for going to church, responses differ significantly in only one category: 17% of Protestants said they attend church for the fellowship and community, while only 3% Catholics said the same. While the statistics show reasons people attend church, statistics cannot reflect how individuals come to reason that way. In order to do this one needs to understand how religion in general plays a role in a person’s social and behavioral development.

Sociologists have often studied religion as an agent of socialization, and as such, as one way to account for people’s behavior. From a sociological standpoint, religion often plays a significant role in an individual’s social formation, especially if that religion is introduced at a young age.
“If you look at different cultures and societies, the people tend to use religious principles of the majority religion as the foundation of their ‘normal’ or ‘expected’ behavioral codes,” says Dr. Marci Gerulis-Darcy Ph.D., a sociology professor at St. Thomas. “When children are born into any religion’s ideology around the world, parents are often looking to pass down what they think is right and wrong, moral and immoral.”

Often times religious practices such as church attendance, are included in the morals and values that parents wish to pass on to their children. This is what Wade Clark Roof and Dean R. Hoge, co-authors of an article entitled Church Involvement in America: Social Factors Affecting Membership and Participation, call the “social learning theory.” This theory argues that people learn by observing the behaviors of others and the outcomes of those behaviors. Thus it follows that an individual’s participation and commitment to a church can be a learned behavior that is passed through family or others commonly observed by the individual.

It is important to note, however, that this does not mean that religion is simply a brainwashing mechanism used to make children behave, or that church attendance is a meaningless by-product of socialization. Rather, there is evidence that church attendance can do more than just spiritually uplift an individual.

According to an article published in the Journal of Family Psychology entitled Religion in the Home in the 1980s and 1990s, there is data that suggests a correlation between religiousness (which often involves church attendance), lower divorce rates, and healthier family environments. The authors of this article conducted 94 studies regarding religion and “marital or family functioning” and found that those who reported a religious affiliation were less likely to divorce while “individuals who report no religious affiliation are noticeably more likely to experience divorce than what typically occurs in the general population.”

And according to the BBC News Service, scientists from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center found that weekly attendance at religious services can add 2-3 years to the average lifespan. Involvement in a religious community can be a means of reducing stress and providing a way for an individual to cope with hardship. It also gives meaning and purpose to life, all of which allow a person to live longer.

Finally, the theological implications of going to church must not be overlooked. For Jews and Christians alike, pausing during a week for a “day of rest” is a way to mirror God’s actions in the Book of Genesis. The institution of the Lord’s Day, when work ceases, family and friends come together, and the Lord is worshipped, has significant implications on the rhythm of life. Worship is an act of humility, of acknowledging that God ought to be the center of our lives, not ourselves. The Author of Life is deserving of our praise, and of the time we take out of our busy lives to go to church.

Catholics view Sunday liturgy, the Holy Mass, as so important that it is deemed an “obligation” for the faithful. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the real presence of Christ that is the Eucharist, made manifest at every celebration of the Mass, is “the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice,” and thus we ought to partake in this sacred meal. It is crucial that members of the Body of Christ gather together in order to break bread and “testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation.” Lastly, to quote Pope Pius X, “Holy Communion is the shortest and safest way to heaven.” What better reason for going to church than this?
Why Catholics are Called to Feast

On February 12th, the Catholic Studies Department hosted the third-annual Monte Cassino Night in Sitzmann Hall. This event, named for the town 80 miles south of Rome where relics of St. Benedict are housed, is an evening of fellowship, music, and casino games. Inspired by this tradition, a few of us studying in Rome for the Catholic Studies semester decided to put together a Monte Cassino-Roma for our confreres. We had a poker tournament, played Bananagrams, and ate good food, but the highlight of the night was a Dance-off/Karaoke combo. All had a great time and I hope this can continue as a Roman tradition in the future.

As I was writing the description of the night, the scene sounded like it would be more fitting in the context of the next mobster movie with Johnny Depp: singing, dancing, drinking—granted, our drinks were non-alcoholic but still—what gives? This would seem like a normal night for the average, high-flying college student at the U of M, but doesn’t it seem out of place for students majoring in Catholic Studies? I mean, aren’t these the same people who go to Mass every Sunday and often on weekdays too? Doesn’t the Bible forbid all that partying stuff? All these questions flow from a misunderstanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ and more specifically, a Catholic.

It is important to note that there is a key difference between Catholic “feasting” and “partying” in the secular sense. While partying is done simply for frivolous self-gratification, feasting is done to give honor and glory to God. Catholics feast on earth as a way to point us to a deeper spiritual reality that is yet to be realized in heaven as a community of believers. We can enjoy the victory of Christ now and hope in eternal life with him.

However, without God at the center of a feast, it has the potential to become uncontrolled indulgence. It can reach the point of engaging only the passions, rather than the intellect and will, which is not a Catholic way to approach feasting. Monte Cassino night would be no good if it stood on its own, but as part of a Christian lifestyle of prayer, worship, and work, good clean leisure has its place. An example of a very good feast is a wedding, when vows are exchanged in the presence of God, followed by the feast: food, dancing, and fellowship.

From the beginning Christ did not come to destroy the world, but to redeem it. He came to give us life and he did do so by his death and resurrection. At Easter, the high feast of the liturgical year, we celebrate Christ’s conquering of death so that we need no longer fear the wrath of eternal damnation but now have hope of eternal life – the great feast of heaven. We Catholics, who have such a great joy and hope in the resurrection of our Lord, have a reason to feast and celebrate life – the new life Christ has given us. This is evidenced in that there are 40 days of Lent, the season of penitence, but 50 days of Easter, the season of rejoicing in the Risen Lord! While fasting acknowledges our fallen state, feasting celebrates our true humanity!
The early Church took feasting very seriously in the abundance of feast days on the early liturgical calendar, honoring the memory of great saints and celebrating significant mysteries of our faith. Feast days meant no labor, thus the secular world, particularly Enlightenment Liberals, got irritated at the lack of productivity from the Catholics. One can still see this in historically Catholic countries such as Mexico and Italy, nations seen as not working enough but feasting quite a bit.

All in all, Catholics feast as a redeemed people. St. Augustine sees this not as something reserved simply for the special holy days, but rather, “The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!” Good feasting, however, must always point to something higher. It must give gratitude and praise to the Creator, who blesses us with the food we eat, the music we listen to, and our next breath of life itself. Here’s to our Lord! Hip hip hurrah!

Elliot Huss

Veiling the Sacred: Mantillas as a Sign of Dignity

My mother often tells me a story of when she was a little girl at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic School. Both then and now, my mother was not abundantly blessed with the gift of memory, and Sister Martha often caught her without her chapel cap.

“Mary,” Sister Albert Joseph would scold, “You have to remember your chapel cap for when we go to Mass.” One clipped-on Kleenex later, my mother was kneeling in the church with her classmates.

I would often wonder, “Sister Albert, what was the big deal?” To this day, it’s a notion that often upsets our modern sensibilities: why impress more “Catholic guilt” on women than on men? What about women is so shameful that they have to “hide themselves” in church?

The short answer: nothing.

I am a self-reliant, confident, proud Catholic woman. I was raised to believe in my own potential and stand up for myself. I am also “that girl” who wears a mantilla at the Chapel of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Why on Earth would any thinking woman wear a veil? In order to address this question, we need to look at a few of the myths surrounding the practice of women veiling themselves in Mass and explore whether the objections hold up under scrutiny.

The primary objections are these: Wearing a veil is oppressive. Men forced women to wear veils as a further sign of their submissive place in the Catholic Church. It is anti-feminist and therefore no longer “done.”

These objections assume that the “feminist” movement and its philosophy of gender is an accurate one. By objecting to the veil on this ground, one also upholds the idea that man and women are identical in all ways, beyond obvious physical differences. There is no intrinsic “masculinity” or femininity,” but only societal roles we are expected to conform to starting at a young age.

According to the Catholic Church and many of its faithful, this idea is inherently false. Though man and
woman are indeed equal in dignity as creatures in the image of the same Eternal Father, they are not identical in the way they relate to the world, the Mass, and to God—nor should they be.

Many women wear the veil for exactly that purpose; that is, to remind themselves and their fellow Catholics of their unique nature as women. In the words of sophomore Catherine Moosbrugger, “Wearing the veil is an honor. Only women get to wear veils, after all. Why wouldn’t you take advantage of that? It’s a sign of our dignity as women.”

In accordance with the special office of women, wearing a veil is in line with the Church’s traditional approach to sacred things. Ms. Moosbrugger goes on to articulate that during the Mass, “the altar is covered by an altar cloth and a lot of times the Tabernacle will be veiled, too.”

These vessels involved in the sacrifice and distribution of the Eucharist are very deliberately veiled because they hold the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. As the traditional Catholic information site fisheaters.com states, “These vessels of life are veiled because they are holy!”

In keeping with this, some traditional Catholic women cover their heads during the Mass because they too can be vessels for sacred life. Although a child is the product of a loving union of man and woman, it is the woman who is the true sanctuary of life. Not only does the woman carry the child in her physical body for nine months, it is also within her (and nowhere else) that the child receives the immortal soul that marks him as a divine creation.

Now, I don’t sit there during the homily thinking, “Oh, man, I am the divine vessel for new human life. Better cover this head of mine!” However, when people ask me why I wear the veil (a very welcome question!), I do say that above all, I am thanking God for making me female. As well, in wearing the veil I am trying to send God a message. I want Him to know that I accept wholeheartedly his particular gift of femininity.

Despite the whispers, cold stares and occasional difficulties that “come with the territory” of wearing a veil, I can’t imagine I will ever stop now. From my mother’s grade-school Kleenex “veil” to my beautiful pink lace mantilla, the practice of head covering is a beautiful symbol of Catholic womanhood.

Although it is a personal decision between a woman and God (and rightly so), I find the practice of veiling so beautiful that I will champion the cause wherever I go.

The Manhattan Declaration: Taking a Stand on Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty

Over the past few years, it seems like whenever I overhear or take part in a conversation about hot topic issues like abortion, homosexuality, or the separation of church and state, the conversation inevitably ends in a stalemate. Often, this occurs not because of differences of opinion regarding the issues themselves, but because some other political or religious convictions get in the way.
Last November, a group of 150 religious leaders from across the Christian spectrum (Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical) met with the goal of crossing these sectarian boundaries and presenting a united front in support of “the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty.” The document they created, called the Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience states in no uncertain terms that these are three moral areas in which there can be no compromise. This is not a political action plan, but rather a statement of principles. In the time since the document was released to the public and to political officials throughout Washington, more than 400,000 people have added their names in support of the declaration. It is perhaps the most unified effort by Christians in modern times to defend their beliefs regarding morality and conscience.

In a summary posted on the Declaration’s website it declares: “Because [the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty] are increasingly under assault from powerful forces in our culture, we are compelled today to speak out forcefully in their defense, and to commit ourselves to honoring them fully no matter what pressures are brought upon us and our institutions to abandon or compromise them. We make this commitment not as partisans of any political group but as followers of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” It is a bold statement, following in the steps of generations of Christians who have faced civil repercussions, persecution, and even death in support of their beliefs.

The implications of this document are potentially great. While the declaration values the role of government in protecting and enhancing society, it makes the bold claim that “we will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God’s,” namely the ability to act according to one’s Christian conscience. Should laws that constrict this ability be passed, signers of the Declaration vow to oppose them, and to accept the consequences of their actions.

The existence of the Manhattan Declaration has reopened debates about Christian unity and about the separation of Church and State. Rather than enter into these debates, I simply pose a few questions for your own thought. What does it mean for Christians with seemingly insurmountable differences in creed to be unified in this document? Do religious institutions have the right to refuse to participate in laws that oppose their religious beliefs? Is the government overstepping boundaries in considering these laws? Whatever ones views on these questions, the Manhattan Declaration challenges each person to look deep within him or herself and determine whether or not one is willing to go the distance, whether or not one is willing to move against the current and be a witness to Christianity. It claims that God’s laws are eternal and that no matter what one’s age, gender, denomination, political party or occupation, one’s first duty is to God. Over 430,000 have responded. Perhaps, finally, there is a common ground that allows for discussion without stalemate.

** Quotes taken from www.manhattandeclaration.org. To read this document or sign it, visit this website.