Keep Holy the Lord's Day

Part Three: The Society of Mary and Worship

By now, you may realize that I am focusing on secularism and its subtle yet unavoidable impact on our religious sensibilities.[1] This series of meditations focusing on worship continues that analysis, treating how it undermines the very foundations of worship. I have already described its message as a kind of gospel (good news) in competition with ***the*** Good News of Jesus Christ. Now I want to look at its liturgical practices, which, together with its gospel, vie for converts, with many Catholics becoming unwitting accomplices if not converts.

Here I want to borrow heavily from James K. Smith,[2] who speaks about this in his lecture, *Culture as Liturgy*.[3] He begins by referring to how his teenagers will ask if they can go to the temple, meaning the shopping mall. It is an inside joke. He has pointed out to them that shopping malls are not neutral spaces because they intend to reconfigure our priorities, including what we consider to be of ultimate value. In that way, they function as a temple or cathedral. What he finds interesting is how this realignment takes place, which I have expanded upon below.

As we all know, malls are large labyrinths that, if we are not careful, can easily leave us disorientated, eventually lost, and susceptible to their influences. (Now, where did I park my car?) Myriads of walkways (aisles) with no windows (glass windows) to direct our attention beyond its confines to something beyond itself. Numerous stores (chapels) line up one after the other. Each one displays its mannequins (saints or icons) and provides sales representatives (greeters) who also serve to answer questions (evangelizers) and to convert us (missionaries) to purchase its product. The price tag or explanation of the item we want to buy might pass for the Liturgy of the W ord. We make our offerings (sales) at the altar (customer service) to the cashier (priest), who blesses us with a receipt. Then we go home where the item is consumed (displayed or used). There are distinct seasons of the year (liturgical seasons) with their particular decorations and colors. This has all the semblance of an order for worship (liturgy). I will let you wrestle with deciding what the mall proposes as the ultimate object (god) it worships.

All the stores (chapels) make up one large cathedral that introduces us to a world all its own. It seeks to convert and orientate us to living the good life (happiness), its version of eternal life. How often have we heard this message that the customer is always right and repeatedly preached in this cathedral? How much impact do you think that statement alone has had on our religious sensibilities?

Again, the point Smith makes is that the shopping mall is not a neutral space but is all about conversion to values or a lifestyle directed toward succeeding in this world and enjoying its pleasures. It assumes that this material world is all that exists. Of course, shopping malls provide the needed products, and I am grateful for them. However, malls are not as innocent or neutral as we may think.

Smith points out that the mall does not care about what we think. The mall cares about what we want. Smith suggests that the mall has been more effective at evangelization and conversion to its gospel because the mall understands we are more tactile and visceral than we are deliberative thinkers. Consequently, Smith points out that no store offers us a list of its beliefs about why we should purchase its products. Instead, the mall knows that the center of human beings lies at their heart and that we are

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[1] For a more thorough treatment of this topic, go to Weekly Way: September 27, 2021 (myschoolapp.com).
[2] James K. A. Smith is professor of philosophy at Calvin University and serves as editor in chief of Image journal, a quarterly devoted to "art, mystery, and faith."
[3] Go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdVkXk3NADE

primarily lovers. That is why advertisements aim at convincing us that by buying its product, we will fall in love with it because it makes us feel a certain way: popular, adventuresome, attractive, successful, happy, etc. They aim to convince the heart, not the mind.

Malls invite us into a secular version of "sacred space" where, after years of exposure, we are being formed by its values into a way of thinking, judging, feeling, and acting. Smith points out that we do not go to the mall only to buy things. The mall shapes us in ways that we are unaware of.

That has a direct bearing on the expectations we bring to Sunday worship. When at Sunday Mass or Sunday services, we unconsciously want the same experience we have at the mall. Remember, the mall is all about catering to our wants and needs and having us feel a certain way. So, we want the Church, specifically Mass, to cater to our wants and needs, making us feel more positive, upbeat, and happy—the same way we leave the mall.

The mall requires little or no thinking. The Mass or Sunday services, however, include prayers, scripture readings, homilies, and Eucharistic Prayers that need us to think about what is being said. What is said may challenge our thinking, attitudes, values, and behaviors. They may call us to conversion from the values and attitudes of the secular gospel preached at the mall that has shaped us and to which we have grown attached without our knowledge.

St. Paul urges the Christian, "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." (Romans 12:2) The Greek word *metanoia* means the renewal of the mind that the Church associates with conversion and repentance. It is hard to want, let alone fall in love with, conversion and repentance. However, the Church intends that we fall in love, not with something, but with someone, Christ, who speaks to us during the proclamation of the Scriptures and who is really and substantially present under the appearance of bread and wine at Mass.

When we leave Mass, we are not guaranteed that our feelings will always be upbeat. No wonder people prefer going to the mall to going to Church. The mall does not care what we think or believe. It caters to what we want and wants us to leave feeling happy so we will return. You could say that the mall worships us human beings since its primary purpose is serving and catering to our wants and desires. We are the focus of its attention unless, of course, we have no money.

The Mass caters to what we need to grow spiritually and conform to Christ and his way of thinking, judging, acting, and feeling. In that sense, the Mass is "indifferent" to how we feel when we leave church. At the same time, the Mass intends to re-orientate our feelings and direct them to fall in love with Christ, who is the source of our joy that the world cannot give and in whom our joy is complete. The extent to which we are not conformed to him is the extent we will be unhappy, no matter how many things we possess.

The mall may bend the knee (genuflect) to us whenever we enter its doors. However, we must bend the knee (genuflect) whenever we enter the church doors and acknowledge the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. We kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer when the bread and wine are changed into his Body and Blood, whereby the Risen Christ, the Son of God, becomes really and substantially present. That is the posture of worship and adoration by which we acknowledge, "in respect and absolute submission, the "nothingness of [us] creatures" who would not exist but for God. To adore [worship] God is to praise and exalt him and to humble oneself, as Mary did in the Magnificat, confessing with gratitude that he has done great things and holy is his name." (CCC #2097)

What we want is not always what we need. We may want the mall and all it has to offer. We need to worship the one, true God to “free us from turning in on ourselves and the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world.” (CCC #2097)

That is why the Lord commanded, “Keep Holy the Lord’s Day.”