

THE DISMISSALS

PAUL TURNER

We have two formal dismissals in every Mass. After the homily we dismiss any catechumens who are present. At the conclusion of the service we dismiss everyone else.

We have too many informal dismissals to number. People leave to get to the bathroom, to take out a small child who's had enough already, or to beat the crowd to the parking lot.

We used to formalize all our dismissals. Records from the early church show dismissals of catechumens and faithful as we have them today. But they also show dismissals of sinners preparing for reconciliation (the "penitents") and of those possessed by demons (the "energoumens").

Dismissals brought order to the service and sent people forward with a mission. This is their real purpose. It's not a "get out of here" ritual, it's a "go forth" ritual. It's not so much about leaving; it's more about going someplace.

When we dismiss catechumens, we're not sending them away like the sticky-faced children of our next door neighbor. We're sending them forth to talk about the word of God they've just heard. When we dismiss the faithful, we send them forth to put the Mass into action, renewed by the Eucharist, proclaiming the Gospel wherever they go.

People who excuse themselves from the assembly because of children or Mother Nature use common sense. But those who leave Mass before the final dismissal cause annoyance. At a purely social level, leaving Mass early is just rude. It's like leaving home without saying goodbye. At a ritual level, leaving after communion shows a misunderstanding about the Mass. People who take communion and run figure they've got what they came for. But they've missed the point of Mass.

Liturgical prayer is common prayer. Singing the songs, making the responses, observing common silences and sharing the sign of peace all bind us in communion long before we share bread and cup. Communion is communion not just with God, but with one another. Those who leave early essentially say they've come to take care of themselves, but they shirk their community responsibility.

The closing dismissal sends us off together so we never have to proclaim the Gospel alone. We are dismissed together, and together we bring Christ to the world.