

I can't focus at Mass. I try, but my mind wanders. Why is this?

This is a great question, and it is something that I imagine every person who has ever been to a Catholic Mass has experienced. I think the main problem is that we are human. That is to say, we have human brains.

The human brain is not static; it is constantly working. Even while we are sleeping, our minds are moving from one thought to the next. It makes sense then to realize that I actually cannot concentrate on one thing for an hour (if by concentrate on one thing I mean have one thought).

Our thoughts are more like a string of pearls, each pearl coming one after the other. We must realize that there is always going to be something going on. There is always going to be another distraction because there is always going to be another thought. The challenge is to direct your thoughts in the path you would like them to go.

Therefore, to settle into prayer, even at Mass, will look less like a perfectly placid pond and more like sailing a boat on that lake. To use an analogy, God's grace is the wind that moves, but we on the sailboat must be aware of that wind and where we are on the lake and where we are headed.

To be sure, there is definitely a clearing of the mind and calming one's thoughts down. But the goal is not numbness; the goal is attentiveness to whatever God is doing. And in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, God is doing something incredible.

When we go to Mass, it is vitally important to understand what is happening. If we do not know, the Mass will be either an unnecessary relic of the past or an interesting diversion.

At the heart of the Mass is the fact that Jesus' saving action of pouring his life out to the Father is made present. His body, blood, soul and divinity are made present in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is an action; it is the action of God the Son pouring himself out in love to God the Father.

If we understand this, and if we understand that this is not figurative or symbolic language (at the Holy Mass, we are at Calvary! O at the Holy Mass, heaven has come to us!), then our involvement is completely changed.

The Mass is an action; it is not merely words. Jesus pours himself out. The priest who speaks the words of consecration pours himself out with Jesus (in the person of Christ). He does not merely say the words, he is supposed to do what the words do. This is what it is to be a priest: to make the sacrificial offering (of Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God), but even more to be the sacrificial offering with Jesus.

You can imagine how easy it is to keep focus during the Mass as a priest. He realizes that he is offering up the great once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus as well as offering himself with Jesus.

But what about everyone else in the pews? Well, you might know this, but when we were baptized, we were baptized into the priesthood of Christ. This means that all Christians are called to offer the sacrifice and to be the sacrifice.

Therefore, while the priest is praying the Eucharistic Prayer (as only a ministerial priest can), the entire congregation is supposed to be united with each word he speaks. The entire congregation is supposed to be exercising its priesthood and offering up the Son to the Father with the priest. Still more, all baptized Christians at that Mass are called to be pouring themselves out with the priest and with the Son to the Father.

We are not just watching the priest. We are being conformed to the image of the Son WITH the priest. This ought to take our breath away. This is why focusing at Mass is not about achieving a calm and more about achieving attentiveness — becoming aware of what we are called to be doing and doing that thing.

Many people reading this will have children and may have a difficult time “getting anything” out of the Mass. Remember, while the words of the holy sacrifice of the Mass are essential, the Mass is an action.

If you have to wrangle or discipline or care for your children, what are you doing? You are pouring yourself out in love. You may be doing the very thing that the Mass is. The step for you might be to realize that your distraction and service are meant to be united with Christ’s sacrifice and offered to the Father. In this way, the Mass never ends.

We bring that attitude out into the world, becoming conformed to Christ’s self-sacrificial love.