Communion for Late Arrivals at Mass:  
When is “too late?”

Since my arrival as your pastor, I have been approached by a number of people asking for published catechetical material and guidance on the subject of “late arrivals to/at the Mass” and during May 2013, three (3) occasions occurred which necessitate this informational bulletin.  Specifically, the frequent question is: if we arrive late for Mass, after what point in the liturgy, should persons refrain from coming forward to receive Holy Communion?  The following is a liturgical article on the subject that I pray helps to inform us on what it means to fully and actively participate in the liturgy of the Holy Mass.

“Mass begins with the entrance procession and ends after the final dismissal, and we should be there from the beginning to the end.  Each part of the Mass relates and complements the others in a single act of worship ... To say that there is a particular moment before or after which, we are either "out" or "safe," so to speak, is to give the wrong message and hint that, in the long run, some parts of the Mass are really not all that important in comparison to the others.

[While many hesitate giving a precise “cutoff” moment, certainly someone who arrives after the Penitential Rite (during which all of the assembly present pray to God to purify their hearts of any remaining venial sins (mortal sins of course, require a formal act of confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation)), one has unfortunately denied themselves of the opportunity to purify their hearts of venial sins, before being fed from the Table of the Word (the holy scripture) and coming forward to be fed from the Table of the Altar (by receiving Holy Communion).]  

Arriving on-time for church liturgies, is not just a fulfillment of our obligation to attend every Sunday and day of obligation liturgies, but a personal demonstration of our love and respect for Our Lord, who has gathered us together to share His gifts and grace in each part of the Mass.

It is also a sign of respect for the community with whom we gather to worship and who awaits our presence and the valuable contribution of our prayers … [It is an essential part of our call by the Church to provide a full, active and conscious participation in all liturgical celebrations].

Thus people who arrive late to Mass have not fulfilled their Sunday obligation and should honestly ask themselves: Why?  If we arrive late because of some justified reason or unforeseen event, such as blocked traffic due to an accident, we have acted in good conscience and are not strictly obliged to abstain from receiving Communion and seek to attend a later Mass (although they should do so if, we arrive very late and it is possible for us).

If people arrive late due to their own, recurring culpable negligence, and do so habitually, then they are asked to seriously reflect on such adverse practices, work towards appropriate changes and remedies, and if necessary, seek first the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Communion later.

(SR:  ROME, NOV. 4, 2003 (Zenit) - Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum)  
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