

Five Minute Gist with Jesus

The priest called on parents to help, leading to the creation of new altar boys. The author and a friend, Collins, decided to teach the boys about Catholic doctrine and the importance of their work on the altar. They started classes every Monday and afterwards, the boys were introduced to Jesus through a five-minute conversation in the Chapel "gisting" with Jesus, demonstrating the power of mental prayer. Although not perfect, the work of the altar boys improved.

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Imagine my shock when at the end of Mass one day the parish priest at my church announced that he was dismissing all altar servers with immediate effect. According to him, the altar (or Mass) servers, as they are called here, were acting irresponsibly and not giving due reverence to the wine and host used for Holy Mass. The priest also complained that some money had gone missing from the “offering” box. Having failed to find the culprit and with no one volunteering useful information, he decided it was best to ask all of them to leave.

So it was that from then on and about three weeks, the priest had no one (except a seminarian) to help him during Mass: two daily Masses on weekdays and four Masses on

Sundays. I was sorry for both the priest and the seminarian and often had the urge to go up to help them.

After a while the priest called on parents whose sons wanted to help as altar servers to send in application letters. Soon, there were new altar boys serving at Mass. Although they were young and inexperienced, they were a great help to the priest. One day, during a weekday Mass, I observed some of them arguing on the altar on which of them should ring the bell during consecration. While I found this incident funny, it also occurred to me that the previous bad behaviour of the former set of altar servers may have been due to ignorance of Catholic doctrine. Perhaps I can do something about this. I then decided to help these new ones understand what being altar server meant, what being a Catholic meant and implied.

I shared this concern with a friend of mine, Collins, asking him to join me to help these boys understand the teachings of the church and why what they do on the altar is important. He agreed and together we went to the parish priest to explain our intention and plans. He was immediately interested in the project and wanted to know what we were going to teach them. He agreed with our plan to use the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

After Mass the next day the parish priest asked all the altar boys to remain behind for a meeting in the church hall. He introduced Collins and I to them and left them in our charge. After getting to know the boys, we told them the plan and began having classes every Monday morning immediately after Mass, starting from the first commandment of the Decalogue. We have had

interested conversations with the boys. One of them once asked: “Sir, are you saying that what the Priest raises up after those prayers is the body of Jesus?”. We responded by reminding him of what Jesus did in the Bible while at the Last Supper with his disciples. After the explanations, the boy beamed with delight and satisfaction.

We started the classes with about 25 boys, rising to 30 in total. Some days the topic of the class was about young people who died with a reputation for holiness because they loved God above all things. In this context, we introduced the boys (through some video documentaries) to the lives of Pedro Ballester and Carlo Acutis, two young people whose processes of canonization are in progress. Of course, soccer was also on the schedule.

Our work did not make the lives of the altar boys and their work perfect, but I am sure it improved in some ways, particularly whenever our Lord was raised up on the Altar.

The feast of St. Josemaría is celebrated on June 26 every year. As we approached that day we introduced the boys to him through a video documentary. Collins and I also invited the parish priest to say the feast day Mass of St. Josemaría in his parish. He happily obliged. We got donations from a friend to buy some snacks and drinks to celebrate that day as a feast day with other people. At the end of the Mass, we gave our many prayer cards with the prayer of intercession to St. Josemaría, to all who attended. Of course, we invited the priest to join us for the refreshments after Mass. After leading the grace before meals, the priest asked some altar boys to follow him as he had something for

us. These latter returned with more treats, contributed by the priest to our little feast day party.

After a few months of our regular classes with the altar servers, we decided that it was time to “introduce” them to Jesus. We explained to them that henceforth, after 15 minutes of the class we would all go to the Chapel and sit down to talk with Jesus for five minutes. The boys kept wanting to know what we were going to say to Jesus. We slowly began to teach them how to pray. We encouraged them to imagine themselves laughing and having fun with their best friends. We invited them to think of Jesus as a second-best friend and to tell him stories about their parents and siblings, big or small. The first time doing this with them was a bit amusing, because as soon as we entered the Chapel, the younger ones among the boys lay down on the

floor, closed their eyes and one could see their lips moving. You couldn't tell if they were talking to themselves or to Jesus. We also taught them to pray using "The Way", a book of short reflections written by St. Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei. One of the boys was tasked with reading each point as the others listened. The point was to serve as a "spark" to ignite a personal conversation between each boy and Jesus who was before us in the Blessed Sacrament. At the end of the five minutes of prayer, we all knelt down, prayed the concluding prayer and left the chapel. Those laying down on the floor stood up and left with us. On the next occasion the older boys tried to dissuade us from bringing along the younger boys, because their lying down on the floor was distracting for the older ones. The younger altar servers on their part protested that they too were praying while lying down. This

caused a general laughter among everyone. We were happy to have introduced the boys to mental prayer or meditation.

A few weeks later, during one of the classes on doctrine, one of the altar boys came up to me and asked, “Sir, when are we going for our five-minute gist with Jesus?” Smiling, I told him that we would go again the following week but that on his own, he could “gist” with Jesus at any time and had no need to wait for anyone else. I think he got the message.

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