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by Robert and Isabel McEachern

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Google the question "Do I have to go to Mass on vacation?" and you'll get a master class in apologetics — and maybe a scolding. But as a couple who have been fortunate to travel extensively together, we have found that going to Mass on vacation is not an interruption but rather a chance to deepen the travel experience while also deepening one's faith.

There's an old distinction sometimes made among vacationers: tourist versus traveler. A tourist often sees the highlights of a place, does the things that are expected and ticks off boxes. A traveler, on the other hand, explores: walks off the beaten path, absorbs the local culture, tries to meet and learn from folks who live there. Going to Mass allows us to experience the joys of being travelers.

No matter where we are in the world, the Mass gives us comfort, with its familiar rhythms and rituals. Even in places where we know little if any of the language, we know exactly what is happening.

But at the same time, the Mass is intensely local, giving us that glimpse into a culture that travelers crave. The Mass almost always reflects where we are and the people whom we are among.

On a recent trip, we had a stop in Strasbourg, France, planned on a Sunday. The Notre-Dame Cathedral of Strasbourg is stunning, a gothic masterpiece. To get to the 11 a.m. Mass, which was said in French and German, we broke away from our guided tour a few minutes early. We had dressed for comfort that day, in casual walking clothes and shoes made for the cobblestone streets of the Petite France section of the city. We worried that our casual clothes would seem disrespectful in this beautiful cathedral, especially in France, known for its high fashion (if "Emily in Paris" is any indication).

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We felt less out of place when we saw the cantors, two young people with beautiful voices, dressed in jeans, and one of the ushers, a teenager dressed in a black graphic T-shirt and running shorts. We were a bit surprised at the offertory, after collection baskets were passed, when two more ushers walked up the aisles with handheld credit card readers. That was a first for us, even though we have gone to Mass in many parishes in the U.S. with, shall we say, entrepreneurial pastors.

But perhaps the most "traveler" moment for us came at Communion. We are used to an orderly process, with each row sitting until its turn comes, and then standing somewhat in unison and proceeding to the center aisle. Not so in Strasbourg, where nearly everyone gets up at once, rushing for the center aisle, as if worried that there might not be enough hosts. It broke our prayerful mood somewhat to figure out how to politely cut into line. We learned later that the French do not like to wait in line — a bit of cultural education.

We have had these small moments of cultural insight in other parts of the world, too. Once we went to Mass at the Westminster Cathedral in London; it just happened to be the day when young people were receiving the sacrament of confirmation. We got to be a part of the joy of the community as they welcomed new adults into the faith.

We attended Mass in Amsterdam, a port city that is international, vibrant and youthful. We were delighted to see so many young people and hear the many different languages spoken before and after Mass.

We have a special fondness for Jesuit churches, as Isabel's uncle Tom was a Jesuit missionary for over 50 years in India. In Edinburgh, Scotland, we attended Mass at the Jesuit church next door to where we were staying, on the same street as two "gentlemen's clubs"; it reminded us very much of Father Tom's stories of Jesuits "meeting people where they are."

It's easy to see the local culture, even in the U.S. One year, our rather large family held our annual reunion in West Virginia, where we went white water rafting. After Communion at a local parish, the pastor asked if there were any visitors that day. Our contingent of 25 raised our hands. The altar servers came to us carrying wicker baskets, from which they distributed "traveler's rosaries" to each of us. The congregation then prayed together for our safe journey. It was all a reflection of the warmth we had received elsewhere that week by people we met, welcoming the stranger and recognizing our common humanity.

We were once invited to bring up the gifts at the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans during the Easter Vigil and saw the piety of its residents, a mere half-mile from where we had partied with them on Bourbon Street.

At a church in South Philadelphia that offers Masses in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Indonesian, we chatted with the then-retired pastor as he joyfully told us about

the waves of immigrant groups that he had seen in his time growing up in and then serving the parish.

We don't go to Mass as some kind of anthropological exercise. Seeing the ways that others worship, those local variations on the universal Mass, does spark conversation — as much as we would have from visiting a museum or other cultural site. But the conversation helps deepen our appreciation of our own home parish and its traditions, and how they express our faith.

Perhaps the most moving experience we have had as travelers was attending Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It's a breathtaking building — part church, part museum, part art gallery. We arrived fairly early in the day, before it got too crowded, and walked around the basilica, contemplating the beauty of the art, being moved to tears by Michelangelo's Pietà and doing our best to stay out of the way of the Instagram influencers who were posing in the perfect light coming through the stained glass.

After about an hour, we attended daily Mass in one of the side chapels, dedicated to St. Joseph, in Italian. Despite the language barrier, we knew exactly what was happening, a testament to the universality of the Mass. We prayerfully walked up the short center aisle to receive Communion. As we returned to our seats, we saw a line of tourists standing behind the velvet rope that marked the back of the chapel, all of them with their phones out, taking our pictures and recording us.

Honestly, it broke the spell. But on the walk back to our hotel, we talked more about the experience. It's likely that many visitors to St Peter's are not Catholic, and of those who are, only a few dozen attended the Mass in the side chapel with us. We realized then that seeing us at Mass could be a part of the experience for them. It was a small, quiet moment of evangelizing. Perhaps they will scroll through their photos later that day, or when they get back home, and start to ask questions of their own, seeking answers. Perhaps they will stop being tourists, and start being travelers — but this time, on a journey of faith.