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'Christmas and Easter' Christians

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Nearly every minister of the Gospel has noticed the surge in attendance -- sometimes huge -- at Christmas and Easter services. Over the years, I heard some horror stories about how ministers and priests respond to the strangers in their pews.

One priest sternly told his visitors that if they only show up on Christmas and Easter, they should not take communion and were in danger of going to hell. Another minister told those gathered for his Christmas service that the smelly shepherds understood what was going on in the stable more than the strangers before him.

It is not pastorally wise to criticize -- or lay down the law to -- these Christmas and Easter Christians and other visitors who join the regular community of believers for Christianity's great feasts, for at least two reasons.

First, while everyone ultimately benefits from hearing the truth about themselves, they often are able to hear it only from people they know -- people who love them. Starting a conversation with strangers by criticizing them is not only tactless, it won't work. On the great feasts of Christmas and Easter, the word that should be spoken from the pulpit is the truth of God's love for everyone, especially sinners. As Paul explains, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Second, pastors, especially, need to ask themselves why so many people don't attend church regularly. Could it be that services are lifeless, the preaching uninspiring, the music dreadful and reverent silence absent? Might it also be that a number of believers have been scandalized by the behavior of certain pastors and church leaders, the very people who are expected -- yes, sometimes unrealistically -- to represent the Gospel? Pope Paul VI once remarked that one of the reasons there are so many atheists is because of the kinds of Christians they see.

The state of the belief of regular congregants needs more pastoral attention as well. People today frequently have doubts about their faith and about church teachings. These are not the people who sociologists write about -- those who believe but do not belong. I'm talking about those who are doubters and still belong. They need reassurance. Even more, they need thoughtful explanations -- even explorations -- of the grounds for their faith. If pastors recognize and address the difficulties that many people have today with believing, they will likely deepen the faith of their congregants, paradoxical as that may seem.

Easter offers a great opportunity for pastors. Rather than scold the newcomers before them, they should reach out to them with compassion, and their joy in the Risen Lord will be what invites them back.

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