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Beyond the Numbers  
BY BISHOP THOMAS J. TOBIN  
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So, we shared a little good news recently, with the release of the October Sunday Mass Count numbers, indicating that from October 2009 to October 2010 Mass attendance across the Diocese increased by about two percent. "Not a big deal," you say.

"And you're right," I agree. But, in fact, a two percent increase is better than a two percent decrease, and these days we'll take good news whenever we can get it. It seems that our culture is increasingly taken by the use of surveys and polls, especially in things political. And while the reported numbers can be interesting, and sometimes even valuable, without a doubt we always need to be cautious in reporting and interpreting poll numbers. The same is true about our annual October Mass Count procedure. The fact is, no one really knows, with any degree of certainty or "margin of error," how many people attend Mass in the Diocese of Providence.

For starters, we're not even sure how many Catholics live in Rhode Island. Is it 500,000, 600,000, or more, or less? These numbers are reported annually to the Diocese by our parishes and the information we receive varies widely in its dependability. In many cases the numbers are general estimates at best.

And when we speak of "Catholics" in the Diocese what does that mean? Does it refer to all those who were baptized Catholic? Or those who happen to be members of Catholic households? Or those who are actually registered in a parish? Or those who have some occasional sacramental contact with a parish? Or those who receive and use budget envelopes?

And how accurate is the October Mass count? Do pastors have a team of people actually counting those who attend Mass on a given Sunday? Or do they use estimates from previous years? And is the count on a particular Sunday influenced by the weather? Or by activities in the local community? Or the Patriots game time?

Despite these uncertainties, it seems to me that the October Mass Count, a procedure followed in many dioceses by the way, has value if its limitations are recognized and if it's taken for what it is – namely a snapshot, a little peek into what's happening in the churches of the Diocese on any given Sunday. And particularly in the context of our recent Year of Evangelization, tracking these trends in our parishes can be especially useful.

The point of all this is to emphasize that in speaking of Sunday Mass attendance we need to focus not just on the raw numbers of people who are attending, on quantity, but rather on more important questions that speak of the quality of our faith. Why is it important for Catholics to attend Sunday Mass? What is the experience of average Catholics when they attend Sunday Mass? And what can we do to encourage Catholics to get to Mass on Sundays?

In speaking of why it's important for Catholics to attend Sunday Mass, we can of course point to obligation – that in fulfillment of the Third Commandment and the

traditional disciplines of the Church, we have a very serious obligation to attend Mass on Sunday, every Sunday. It's part and parcel of being a Catholic. And yes, it's still a serious sin to deliberately miss Mass on Sunday – illness and other serious causes allow for dispensation of course.

There are other good reasons why it's important to attend Holy Mass on Sundays. It's there that we gather with a community that shares our religious faith and moral values. It's there that we find a quiet oasis in the midst of the secular desert we travel every day. It's there that we hear the Word of God proclaimed and applied to the realities of daily life. And it's there, and only there, that we can receive the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ, the Bread of Life.

But that leads to the next question: what is the experience of the average Catholic when they attend Sunday Mass? Do they find a warm and welcoming community? Do they encounter a liturgy that's well-prepared and reverent, a liturgy with inspiring music and challenging homilies? Do they appreciate the precious gift of the Eucharist and receive our Lord with reverence, gratitude and humility? Spiritual verities aside, many folks won't attend Sunday Mass if it's not life-giving and personally rewarding. And finally, what can we do to encourage our fellow Catholics to attend Mass on Sunday? Well, the Diocese and our parishes and schools have to continue the zeal for evangelization we generated last year, using enthusiastic and creative programs to reach out to people. And as I've written previously, you, dear friend, should assume your role as a personal evangelist and reach out to neighbors, family members, co-workers and friends and invite them to attend Holy Mass with you. Parents, especially have a solemn obligation before God and the Church to attend Mass every Sunday and ensure that their children do as well.

You see, the counting of people who attend Sunday Mass is helpful in gauging the pastoral health of our diocesan Church. But truly, it's only a beginning. The Sunday Eucharist is the center of our Catholic Faith experience. As a community we've got to take it seriously – to prepare well, pray well, and give good example by our own attendance – every Sunday. If we do that, the liturgy will be beautiful and inviting, the spiritual focus of the entire week, and then the numbers will take care of themselves.