
Can You Make A Mistake During The Sunday Service?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Last Sunday, I heard a comment I have heard again and again during my church ministry. I have heard it from priests, from bishops, from acolytes, lectors, parishioners, and all sorts. It's a very simple comment: "I'm sorry for the mistake I made during the Sunday service."

The so-called "mistakes" I have seen in Sunday services have ranged from the trivial to the truly spectacular. I have heard the wrong lesson read about a hundred times now. I have seen entire chalices of wine toppled by the wild arms of a priest. I have seen the sermon moment arrive and no priest rise to preach. I once saw an acolyte fall asleep during the sermon and topple over backward out the door and out of the church. (Actually, that acolyte was me, at about twelve years old!)

What I told the person this past Sunday is what I have told people over and over again. I do not care about the mistakes you made during the Sunday liturgy; what I do care about is whether you were praying. If you are having an experience of prayer on Sunday morning, then the "mistakes" do not matter.

Can you make a mistake during the Sunday service? I believe that, if you are praying during your ministry, the answer is "No." I do not mean that God will protect you from forgetting something. I mean that your Sunday service is successful if you have had an experience of prayer and worship. That is an authentic Sunday liturgy.

There are some Sundays when the liturgy seems perfect and error-free, but when I would claim that the liturgy was unsuccessful. It was unsuccessful if no one prayed, if no one sang, if no one was truly moved to worship, if no one had an experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It was unsuccessful if there was more worry than praise.

There are always some well-intentioned ministers-ordained and not ordained-who are looking at me as if I were keeping score. (They may be looking at God, too, as if God were keeping score.) They see me gazing, and they wonder if they did something wrong. In fact, I do make it a point to look around during worship and prayer. But I am not keeping score. I am looking for people who are praying and singing and worshipping. Their energy gives me energy! I pray with my eyes open on Sunday so that I can see the Spirit in people.

In short, the reason any of us comes to church-I hope-is to worship God. I hope we do not come to church just to fulfill a set of empty rules and expectations. Come to the Sunday service in order to worship a living and active God; do not come to Sunday service merely to worship an empty idol, a vacant shell of rules and procedures.

The God we worship on Sundays is the God of grace and liberty. That God really does want to move us; God wants to move us, spiritually and emotionally and intellectually. When we are so moved, our church really becomes holy. Do not bring the god of obsessive-compulsive anxiety into this holy place! There is enough of that on the outside.

Can you make a mistake during the Sunday service? Yes, I suppose so. But what we often think of as mistakes are not the real errors on Sunday morning. I actually do not mind when the priest drops the wafers or reads the wrong gospel, because those actions can actually occur in the context of praise and prayer. Give me a smiling acolyte who turns the wrong way,

instead of a glum face who is oblivious to everyone around them.

In short, anything we do that interrupts prayer and praise is a mistake. We can worry and fret. We can interrupt. We can ignore our neighbor. We can refuse to look at people. Or we can move, and be moved, in prayer. That is authentic humanity, and that is authentic worship. I thrive on that authenticity and spirit, and I hope you do, too!

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