



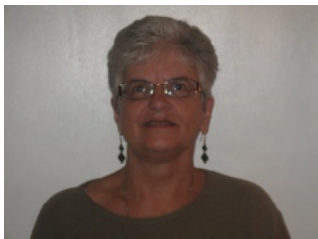
Recently, I attended daily Mass at a small parish near my home. As I was running late, I slipped into a pew toward the rear of the church. As I sat down, I noticed that it was unusually quiet. Then I noticed that the deacon was speaking, but I was unable to hear him. When the priest began to speak, and I was unable to hear him, that's when I realized that I had left my hearing aids at home. I had forgotten to put them into my ears when I got dressed!

Since I have been going to Sunday Mass for decades, I was able to follow the Mass without much trouble, even joining in on the responses whenever appropriate. It helped that there were people all around me also audibly giving the responses and I could hear them, even though not as clearly as usual. When the choir sang, I could follow them too and join in on the hymns.

As the Mass progressed and I remained in my mostly silent bubble, it occurred to me that this must be what a non-Catholic (or one who has been away from the church for a while) experiences. They probably would have trouble following the Mass and understanding the various activities that active Catholics take for granted. Even as a long-time practicing Catholic, I am still learning more about the Mass and the more I learn, the more it means to me.

I have been Catholic since I was a young child and thought I might be able to talk about what it means to be Catholic so at one point in my life, I decided to join the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) team to help people interested in becoming Catholic and to learn more about my faith myself. RCIA, talking to friends and to priests and deacons, listening to Catholic speakers, reading appropriate books including the Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Sunday sermons at Mass, and watching appropriate videos are all some ways of learning about what it means to be a Catholic.

I'm sure my understanding of Catholicism has grown over the years and hopefully has made me a better Catholic and a better human being. There have been changes in the church over the years (the Mass in Latin when I was growing up and now in English for one) just as I have grown and changed. To this day, I belong to a Catholic study group that supports me and expands what I know about the church and how to function in our society. I am still a seeker and as a seeker, I often find new nuggets of information that support and strengthen me. Life is a wonderful journey when you are open to new things. Enjoy your own journey.



Stephanie Harakal is a parishioner at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church in Farmingdale, NJ. She has been active in the Rosary Altar Society, RCIA, as a Sunday collection counter, and as a reader at Mass. Currently, she is a Minister of Holy Communion and a member of the Legion of Mary Auxiliary whose members say the Rosary every day. Stephanie is also the webmaster for St. Catherine of Siena Church.