

CRITICAL MASS

By Michael Zielinski

The curtain rises on MARGE and RICH FAUST, a middle-age couple driving in their car. He is behind the wheel.

RICH FAUST

Here we go again, jumping through damn hoops so we won't miss Mass. Does it ever end?

MARGE FAUST

Busy weekends for people who travel a lot weren't made for attending Mass. I wish you could download a video of Mass and watch it on your phone when it's convenient for you on a Sunday.

RICH FAUST

I could even watch Mass on my phone at home while sitting on the john on a Sunday morning.

MARGE FAUST

There you go. And then you wouldn't be getting ink stains on the toilet from reading the Sunday sports section.

RICH FAUST

Back in the day, it was simpler to go to Mass. People didn't travel that much. *(He yanks the steering wheel hard and flashes a finger).*

MARGE FAUST

Sometimes they did. A nun told me that natives living in the jungle used to walk five miles to church, using crocodiles as stepping stones when they had to cross rivers. And what about the settlers going west in covered wagons? They had to have trouble finding a Roman Catholic Church.

RICH FAUST

Not if it was a Catholic wagon train. Then a priest went along. The priest often doubled up as the cook who made the beans and the coffee. He fed the soul and the body.

MARGE FAUST

Remember when Sue and Sam Sweeney took along their pastor when they took that Alaskan cruise? He said Sunday Mass in their cruise ship cabin. He had to use the bathroom sink for the altar. Instead of communion wafers, he had to use dinner rolls. And the wine was the house wine from the dining room.

RICH FAUST

God knows that those cabin bathrooms are small.

MARGE FAUST

Sue said that the water was real choppy that day, with the ship rocking and rolling. It was a real adventure for the priest to pour the wine into a plastic cup that was substituting for his chalice. And Sam had forgotten to take his motion sickness pill that day and wound up interrupting Mass right before the transubstantiation when he vomited in the toilet.

RICH FAUST

The transubstantiation is the part of the Mass when the priest turns the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, right?

MARGE FAUST

Correct. Only Roman Catholic priests have the power to literally change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. I think they could have found a better name for such a miracle than transubstantiation. It sounds like it's part of the New York subway system.

RICH FAUST

Where the hell is this Roman Catholic Church we're looking for in Podunkville? If this church were any more remote, it would be on the planet Mercury.

MARGE FAUST

I don't think there are many Catholics living in this area. It's predominantly Protestant.

RICH FAUST

God, I envy Protestants. They can miss Sunday services and not go to hell.

MARGE FAUST

That's because Roman Catholics are special. We're held to a higher standard because we are the only church founded by Christ himself. All the Protestant denominations were founded by fallen Catholics who couldn't cut the mustard.

RICH FAUST

Lucky us. We're the chosen people. For our reward, if we miss Sunday Mass we instantly commit a mortal sin and will be doomed to hell for eternity if we die before we get our ass to confession. I've been going to Sunday Mass since I was five. Now I'm forty-five. For forty years, I've been going to Mass as much as possible. Moses spent forty years wandering in the wilderness. He paid his dues and so have I. You would think they would cut me some slack after stockpiling such an inventory.

MARGE FAUST

Moses was a Jew, not a Catholic. And he died before he got to The Promised Land. God is one tough deity. Which is why Catholics are only as good as their last Sunday Mass. Catholicism is a what-have-you-done-lately-for-God religion. At least they made it slightly easier on us by allowing us to count Saturday evening Mass toward our Sunday obligation.

RICH FAUST

That helps some, but as we have found out, that isn't always enough sometimes. If you go to an out-of-town wedding on a Saturday and then you must go to a post-wedding Sunday brunch, how the hell do you squeeze in Mass?

MARGE FAUST

And then there are your golf tournaments.

RICH FAUST

Draw a late tee time on a Saturday and an early tee time on a Sunday and you have a better chance of getting a hole-in-one than getting to Mass that weekend. Even when the tournament is scramble format, the real scramble is trying to make Mass. But even when I don't make it, at least I'm thinking of Christ the whole weekend.

MARGE FAUST

Come on, Rich. Taking the Lord's name in vain whenever you slice or hook a tee shot isn't the same as praying in church.

RICH FAUST

Marge, are you sure we aren't lost?

MARGE FAUST

I think we're OK. But my Maps GPS on my smartphone keeps crapping out.

RICH FAUST

I told you to download the Waze app on your phone. It's awesome at giving directions. It even lets you know when you're approaching a cop car.

MARGE FAUST

You know that I'm not good at downloading apps.

RICH FAUST

I'm married to the only woman under-fifty in America who is clumsy with her smartphone. I'm shocked you finally learned how to text people.

MARGE FAUST

OK, I'm suck at technology. The world moves too fast for me. After all, it wasn't all that long ago that medieval monks were copying scripture texts.

RICH FAUST

I wonder if they ever got so immersed that they missed Sunday Mass.

MARGE FAUST

In a monastery? They ran too tight a ship for that to ever happen. Screw up and you were scourged until you bled.

RICH FAUST

I think Catholics should lighten up. Remember when our rusty tailpipe fell off while we were driving to Mass in rural South Carolina?

MARGE FAUST

How could I forget? You had to take off your belt to tie up the tailpipe before some redneck country sheriff arrested us. Of course, your pants were too big.

RICH FAUST

They were sagging off my ass like I was some rap singer. And wouldn't you just know it that my pants slipped to my knees just as I was receiving communion?

MARGE FAUST

I still can hear that old priest screaming that your nuts were hanging out.

RICH FAUST

Goddamn, this bastard in front of me is a turtle. (*He angrily blows the horn*). Why do these winding country roads always come equipped with a driver playing turtle crawling in front of you? It's almost impossible to pass them without risking running into an approaching truck or something.

MARGE FAUST

I call them The Clots. They always seem to be stuck in front of us when we are in a hurry to get to church. I think God puts them there purposely because he wants us to leave earlier for Mass.

RICH FAUST

Leave earlier? We've been driving for almost an hour. I didn't realize that this damn church was this far away. I don't even feel in the mood for Mass.

MARGE FAUST

You never are in the mood for Mass. You hate going to Mass. The only reason you do is to cover your ass because you don't want to go to hell. And when you are at Mass, you sleep through most of it. God is all-knowing and he knows that you while you may be in church, you're not hearing Mass.

RICH FAUST

Listen to Sister Marge here. You seldom respond with the congregation because you're too busy checking out what your friends wore to church and who looks fat in their dress.

MARGE FAUST

What decade are you living in? Nobody dresses up to go to church anymore. The women look like they're going to the gym and the men look like they're going to change the oil in their car. And why do people wear coats in church? They don't keep their coats on when they go to a movie, a concert or a basketball game.

RICH FAUST

If Roman Catholic Churches had to build large cloak rooms, they would make us tithe. So, keep your coat on and offer it up for your sins. By the way, nobody I know outside of Fred Bradshaw changes their own oil anymore. And he only does it to show off and pretend he's handy. But did he ever put down a hardwood floor like I have? Jesus Christ, my oil light just came on. Damn it!

MARGE FAUST

You told me two weeks ago that we had a slight oil leak and you did nothing about it even though we were going on this trip. Nice move, Rich.

RICH FAUST

You know that I've been busy as hell at work. You know where the dealership is. You could have taken my car to the shop and I could have taken your car to the office.

MARGE FAUST

And then how would I go to work? Rent a horse and a chariot?

RICH FAUST

Uber.

MARGE FAUST

And risk getting raped?

RICH FAUST

It's not that much of a risk. (*He chuckles and she slaps him on the arm*). So, walk to work. It's a half-mile from our house. You walk three miles a day on the treadmill.

MARGE FAUST

So, you doubt that a Uber driver would find me attractive, huh? You aren't exactly Harry Handsome, you know. And I'm not walking outside. Do you know what humidity and wind do to my hair?

RICH FAUST

Fuck, my engine light just went on. It's overheating. I'd better add some oil. Fortunately, I have a couple quarts of oil in the trunk. *(He stops the car, gets out, walks back and opens the trunk, pulls out the two quarts of oil, walks to the front of the car and pops open the lid and checks the dipstick)* Shit. We may need more than two quarts. *(He kneels and looks under the engine)* Damn, the oil leak is getting worse. *(He pours in two quarts of oil, walks back to the trunk and tosses in the empty bottles, and gets back into the car)* We can't screw with an overheating engine. We need to find out where the hell this church is. *(He pulls out his smartphone and checks his Waze app)* Fuck. We must have missed a turn somewhere. We overshot it by five miles. *(He hands his phone to his wife)* Use my phone and get us there, Marge. After church, we're going to have to find a Sheetz or a Wawa and get some oil and radiator coolant.

MARGE FAUST

That might take a miracle here in the hinterlands so I'll start praying now.

RICH FAUST

Perhaps I'm getting cynical, but did you ever think that the real reason the Roman Catholic Church says it's a grave sin to willfully miss Sunday Mass is economic? If you're not in the pew, that means neither is your collection envelope.

MARGE FAUST

You could always mail them the envelope.

RICH FAUST

That's a dead giveaway that you blew off Mass. And then they won't give you a Catholic burial even if you already have paid a fortune for a lot in a Catholic cemetery.

MARGE FAUST

You think about money too much.

RICH FAUST

I'm a financial adviser. I get paid to think about money. The Catholic Church thinks about money too much. The Vatican's wealth is estimated to be ten billion to fifteen billion dollars. Christ threw out the money changers from the temple. Guess what? They're back. The Church should be thinking more about saving souls. And it sure has dropped the ball on converts. Jesus sent out the disciples to convert the whole world. Guess what? There are many more non-Christians than Christians in the world. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics. Europe and America are getting more secular all the time.

MARGE FAUST

You forgot Tom Cruise's religion.

RICH FAUST

Scientology is a cult, not a religion. Just like freemasonry.

MARGE FAUST

And none of them are required to go to church every Sunday.

RICH FAUST

Precisely. Shit! There is smoke coming from the engine and my car is overheating because of the oil leak, which apparently has gotten worse. We need to pull over.

MARGE FAUST

Look! There is a sign for St. Paul's. Pull into the lot. I guess God got us here just in time.

RICH FAUST

I don't want to blow the engine but we can creep into the parking lot.

MARGE FAUST

Uh-oh. Look at that sign. This is St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

RICH FAUST

Damn it, that's not going to cut it. Even we catch the tail end of this Lutheran service, it won't fulfill our Sunday obligation to hear a Catholic Mass.

MARGE FAUST

Considering all the hell we've gone through to get here, do you think God would be so picky?

RICH FAUST

You're talking about a God who drowned the whole world except for Noah's family and a bunch of animals.

MARGE FAUST

That was the Old Testament God. The New Testament God is nicer. I think Jesus gave him a good talking to.

RICH FAUST

God the Father tells God the Son what to do, not vice versa.

MARGE FAUST

I thought the three persons in God all had an equal say.

RICH FAUST

Not so. The Holy Spirit apparently doesn't talk so he doesn't have a say. And God the Father told Jesus he had to be crucified to redeem us and open the gates of heaven. Jesus' Agony in the Garden is ample proof that he wasn't exactly doing jumping jacks of joy about his impending crucifixion.

MARGE FAUST

Our fate is sealed. It's almost noon and we're going to miss Mass. Then we will have committed a grave sin and will no longer be in the state of grace.

RICH FAUST

We'd better pray we stay alive until next Saturday at 4 when the next confession is. Drive extra carefully all week, assuming we get our car fixed.

MARGE FAUST

We can try to schedule a confession at the church rectory on Monday.

RICH FAUST

And confess face-to-face with Father St. John? That guy is a real zealot, a holy roller always trying to live up to his last name.

MARGE FAUST

We could request to sit in a chair facing away from him

RICH FAUST

When you make the appointment, give fictitious names so he doesn't know it's us.

MARGE FAUST

I just wish that the Catholic Church wouldn't be so territorial. Why doesn't a Lutheran service suffice in a pinch? It's not like we are going to a Buddhist or Hindu or Jewish temple.

RICH FAUST

Marge, see the guy over there? I know Lutheran ministers dress somewhat like Roman Catholic priests but that man looks dressed exactly like a Catholic priest. Besides, the Lutheran ceremony is underway, considering the sign says it started at 11:15 and the parking lot is full. (*He lowers his window and screams*) Hey Father, over here! Over here!

MARGE FAUST

He's coming over! My God, he's coming over!

(A Catholic priest walks up to their car)

CATHOLIC PRIEST

Excuse me, but I seem to be lost. I'm a visiting Roman Catholic priest from out of town and I am supposed to say the noon Mass at St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church and evidently this is St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Do you know where the Catholic St. Paul's is? I evidently put the wrong St. Paul's in my GPS.

MARGE FAUST

Thank God Almighty that you're here. You have saved us from the fires of hell.

RICH FAUST

We're Catholics as well and we also found the wrong St. Paul's. Now it's past noon and Mass already has started.

CATHOLIC PRIEST

Not without me it hasn't. The pastor there is on vacation and Mass doesn't start until I get there. But I have to get there quickly.

RICH FAUST

Our car died. Can you give us a lift? We need to hear Mass.

MARGE FAUST

Our very souls depend on it.

CATHOLIC PRIEST

You two should relax. God isn't that uptight. He understands that you have made a sincere effort to attend Mass today. The diocese is at fault here. They shouldn't have built a church in the middle of freaking nowhere.

MARGE FAUST

Do you think we can find the church in time before all the parishioners leave? They too are facing damnation. They're likely frantic right now wondering where the priest is.

CATHOLIC PRIEST

God won't let us down. When you serve the Lord, he pulls a few strings for you. This time I'm not using a conventional GPS, which as you know stands for Global Positioning System. This time I'm using a divine GPS. God's Positioning System. Jesus, for God's sake get us to the church in time. (*He cups an ear as he looks to the heavens*) This is the address? This is the Lutheran St. Paul's, Lord.

MARGE FAUST

Maybe God became a fallen Catholic and is now a Lutheran.

(BLACKOUT)