

# INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

“Do this in memory of me.” In his book *The Shape of the Liturgy*, famous liturgist Don Gregory Dix, OSB, writes:

*Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. People have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and a bridegroom in a country church;... for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover. ...And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and people continue to work together in order to carry out this command, “Do this in memory of me.”*

For 2,000 years, Catholic tradition has believed and taught that participation in the Holy Eucharist is a central aspect of our faith. It is the way for us to obey the Third Commandment, which calls us to “Keep holy the Lord’s Day.” The Mass is the way we commemorate and make present all that Jesus did for us when he suffered, died and rose again. At the Last Supper, Jesus said to his Apostles (and to us): “*Do this in memory of me*” (1Cor 11:23-34). The early Christians obeyed this command of Jesus by gathering together on the Lord’s Day to listen to the teachings of the Apostles, sharing fellowship and sharing in the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42-43). In this article, I will briefly explain the parts of the Mass.

## Structure of the Mass

The Mass, like a good drama, has a beginning, a middle and an end.

The beginning is more formally called “Introductory Rites,” the middle is “Liturgy of the Word” and “Liturgy of the Eucharist,” and the end is “Concluding Rites.” Let us look at each of these parts of the Mass.

### Introductory Rites

The Introductory Rites consist of everything that happens before the readings (Liturgy of the Word), namely, *Entrance Song/Procession, Greeting, the Act of Penitence Act, Gloria and Collect* (formerly called the Opening Prayer). The purpose of the Introductory Rites is to *unite* all those gathered into a praying community

and to *prepare their hearts to listen to the Word of God* that will be proclaimed in the readings and homily.

The first thing we are asked to do at Mass is to open our hymnals and participate in the Opening Song. We can choose to participate or not. But we should be aware that our behavior at Mass is contagious and affects those around us in a positive or negative way. When we sing with enthusiasm, pray devoutly, listen intently, show warmth and hospitality to everyone, place our money offering in the collection basket, and receive the Body and Blood of Christ with love and faith, we impact the worship atmosphere in a very positive way. A powerful example of how our active participation at Mass can impact those around us is given

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in the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. Prior to his conversion, Augustine would come to church to listen to the homilies and the singing. Concerning the chanting of songs, Augustine writes: “*How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church!*”

## Liturgy of the Word

“When the Sacred Scriptures are read in Church, God himself speaks to his people.” (General Instruction of the Roman Missal #29)

The part of the Mass that we call the *Liturgy of the Word* consists of the three scripture Readings, sung Psalm, Homily, Nicene Creed, and General Intercessions.

In general, the Scripture speaks to us about God’s involvement with his people, his love for them, humanity’s sin, man’s redemption, and God’s constant desire to draw his people closer to himself.

While all the readings proclaimed at Mass are important, the **Gospel** reading is the most important

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because in it, Jesus speaks directly to us. The importance of the Gospel is underlined by a gospel procession and sometimes by the use of incense. In the three-fold sign of the cross on the forehead,

lips and heart, we ask that God be in our minds so that we may *understand* his Word, on our lips that we may *speak* his Word, and in our hearts that we may *love* his Word.

The **First Reading**, usually from the Old Testament, is chosen to connect in some way with the message of the

Gospel. Sometimes the connection is quite obvious, but other times it is not. During the six weeks of the Easter Season, the First Reading is from the Acts of the Apostles.

The **Second Reading** is always a passage from one of the New Testament Epistles. It may be a teaching, a spiritual exhortation, or it may address some pastoral issues in the early Church.

In the **Homily** that follows, the homilist seeks to draw out the meaning of the readings and show how they connect to our daily lives. Sometimes the readings comfort us, sometimes they challenge us. They always instruct us on what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus.

In the **Profession of Faith** or **Creed**, the gathered assembly professes the central truths of their faith. In her book *The Mass*, Joan McHugh writes: “*The moment we say: ‘I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible,’ we enter into a great current that will last until the end of time. How blessed we are to be able to stand up in church, step into that current, joining millions of Christ’s disciples, past and present, who gratefully live and willingly die, by the words of the Nicene Creed*” (p.114).

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During the recitation of the Creed, we bow when we say the words: “*By the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.*” Our bowing is a sign of reverence for that wondrous moment in time when the Creator of the world became fully human like us in all things except sin.

In the **General Intercessions**, sometimes called the *Prayers of the Faithful*, all present pray for the Church, civil authorities, and for the needs of the local community.

### Liturgy of the Eucharist

In the Liturgy of the Word, where the wonderful works of God are proclaimed, our response is one of gratitude which we offer to God in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The focus of our attention moves from the Ambo (lectern) to the Altar-Table.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist has three sub-sections: Presentation of the Gifts, Eucharistic Prayer, and Communion Rite.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we ritualize *four actions* that Jesus did at the Last Supper.

- Jesus “*took bread and wine.*” In the Presentation of the Gifts, which corresponds to this action of Christ, the presider takes the gifts of bread and wine from representatives of the assembly.
- Jesus “*gave thanks.*” The Eucharistic Prayer is our great prayer of thanksgiving to our heavenly Father.
- Jesus “*broke bread.*” In the Breaking of Bread which occurs prior to Holy Communion, the large host is broken into many parts.
- Jesus “*gave it to them.*” During Holy Communion, the assembly receives the bread and wine, which have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we pray that our lives may be *taken, blessed, broken* and made ready to *share* with others. As we receive the Eucharist, we pray that our lives may become Eucharist for others.

During the **Preparation of the Altar** and the **Presentation of the Gifts**, the altar is set up for our Eucharistic sacrifice, and the gifts of bread and wine, and sometimes food for the poor, are brought to the sanctuary.

**Washing of the hands.** In the early Church, the washing of the hands had a practical function. After receiving gifts of food (often from the farm) for the poor, the presider’s hands were soiled and in need of washing. Today, the gesture has a symbolic value in which the presider asks God to cleanse his heart before he offers the sacrifice of Christ by quietly praying: “*Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me of my sin*” (Psalm 51).

Then the presider proclaims the **Eucharistic Prayer** during which the bread and wine, by the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. If we find it hard to believe that the simple gifts of bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, we will do well to meditate on the following words of St. John Damascene, theologian in the early Church. “*If anyone wishes to know how the bread is changed into the Body of Christ at Mass, I will tell him. The Holy Spirit overshadows the priest and acts on him as he acted on the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the angel Gabriel visited her.*” If God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, could place his son in the womb of Mary, he can also fill the bread and wine with his divine presence. Another early saint in our Church, Cyril of Alexandria, writes; “*Do not doubt whether this is true, but rather receive the words of our Savior in faith, for*

since he is the truth, he cannot lie” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para.1381). The assembly enters into this prayer by participating in several sung acclamations.

The heart of the Eucharist Prayer is the *Institution Narrative* or *Words of Consecration*, which contains the words Jesus used at the Last Supper over the bread and wine. Concerning this mystery of our faith, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states: “*Since the Middle Ages, the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ has been called ‘transubstantiation.’ This means that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The appearances of bread and wine remain (color, shape, weight, chemical composition), but the underlying reality—that is, the substance—is now the Body and Blood of Christ*” (p.223).

In his sacrifice on the cross, Christ totally poured out his life for us, totally let go of himself that we might live and be reconciled to God and each other. Jesus seeks to draw us into his act of total self-giving so that we might give of ourselves in service to others.

As you become more familiar with the Mass, you will notice that the priest can choose one of several Eucharistic Prayers. Eucharistic Prayer II is the most ancient of all the prayers and the one most commonly used.

### Communion Rite

The banquet of the Lord is ready. All present now prepare themselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Holy Communion at Mass is an expression of our unity with Christ and with all of God’s people. It is the culmination of our Eucharistic celebration. The prayers and rituals during this section of the Mass are intended to prepare us to receive Jesus, our Savior and Lord, in Holy Communion.

**The Lord’s Prayer.** Two petitions in the Lord’s Prayer make it particularly appropriate to pray prior to receiving Communion: “*Give us our daily bread*” and “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” The “*daily bread*” petition can be linked to the Bread of Life, which we receive in Communion. The reference to forgiveness reminds us of the importance of approaching the Eucharist with a

forgiving heart, or at least with a heart that sincerely desires to forgive.

The **Sign of Peace**, which we share before the reception of Holy Communion, acknowledges that Christ whom we receive in the Sacrament is already present in our neighbor. This gesture should express our sincere desire to forgive all hurts and to be at peace with all people.

**Breaking of the Bread.** During this ritual act, the priest takes a large host and breaks it into many parts, symbolizing that we, the Body of Christ, are both one and many (1Cor 10:16-17).

### Reception of the Body and Blood of Christ

After chanting the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God), the Priest holds up the consecrated hosts and the cup containing the Precious Blood and says:

*Behold the Lamb of God,  
Behold him who takes away the sins  
of the world.  
Blessed are those called  
to the supper of the Lamb.*

The assembly responds:

*Lord, I am not worthy that you  
should enter under my roof,  
But only say the word  
And my soul shall be healed*

These are the words spoken by the Roman centurion when he asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matt 8:8). His faith, humility and confidence are a model for all of us waiting to receive Jesus, the Lamb of God, in Holy Communion.

The *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults* reminds us to prepare conscientiously for the moment of Holy Communion. “*We should be in the state of grace, and if we are conscious of grave or serious sin, we must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion. We are also expected to fast from food and drink for at least one hour prior to the reception of Holy Communion* (p.222). Even though none of us are worthy to receive our divine Lord in Holy Communion (“Lord I am not worthy...”), we must make every effort to be the least unworthy that we can be.

As we approach to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we make a slight bow and respond: “Amen” to the minister’s words, “The Body (and the Blood) of Christ.” The bow is an act of reverence for our divine Lord.

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(St. John Damascene)

## **Fruits and implications of receiving Holy Communion**

Our reception and participation in the Holy Eucharist is intended to deepen our union with Christ and with the members of his Body, the Church. It also helps us to fight sin and weakness and calls us to be bread for all who are hurting and in need of our compassion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras.1391-1401).

Communion is a great moment of intimacy with the Lord and the members of his Body. We come forward, not as isolated individuals, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. We approach not in a sluggish way, but with reverence and love for him who is the life of the world. Our “Amen” to the minister’s words, “The Body (and the Blood) of Christ,” is a profession of our faith by which we declare that:

*I believe, Jesus, that you are the bread of life.*

*I believe, Jesus, that you are the power  
that can transform my life.*

*I believe, Jesus, that these people are my brothers  
and sisters, the Body of Christ.*

*I accept, Jesus, the challenge to become your bread  
for others, and to build up your Body in the world.*

## **Concluding Rites**

At the beginning of the Mass, we are asked to “*Let us pray.*” At its conclusion, we are instructed to “*Let us act*”—as people touched by the Lord.

The *Concluding Rites* of the Mass consist of a *blessing* and a *sending forth* into the world. As the presider raises his hand in blessing, the people sign themselves *in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit* just as they did at the beginning of the Mass.

The presider then dismisses the assembly with these words: “*Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.*” The dismissal is reminiscent of Christ’s Great Commission to his Apostles, “*Go forth into the whole world and teach all nations.*” Having received the gift of life, we are now sent forth to share that life with our brothers and sisters in the world. At the beginning of the Mass, we were asked to “*Let us pray.*” Now we are instructed to “*Let us act*”—as people touched by the Lord. We are sent forth to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We are to be the bread of life for others. We are to share the Good News of God’s love for all with others. We are sent forth to continue the saving work of Jesus in human history.

## **Living the Mass**

At Mass, we *celebrate* the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, i.e., his dying and rising—his *passage* back to the

Father. But it is in our homes, neighborhoods, shopping centers, workplaces, etc., that we *live* the Paschal Mystery. It is in these places that we literally enter into (or fail to enter into) the death and Resurrection of Jesus. We enter into and share in the dying of Jesus when we are called to die to ourselves and our desires, when we experience rejection or misunderstanding, when we are gossiped about and treated unjustly, when we struggle with suffering, sickness, old age, evil and death. We enter into and share in the victory and Resurrection of Jesus every time we let go of bitterness, jealousies, small-mindedness, and all the things that block us from communicating and experiencing the oneness of spirit that we pray for at Mass.

If our daily lives reflect little of the dying and rising of Christ, then we can be sure that our Sunday celebration of those events, however devoutly attended or beautifully celebrated, will be of little interest to our Lord. In fact, he may well say of us, “*These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me*” (Mk 7:6). “Full, conscious and active participation” does not just refer to liturgy but to *all* of life. “Full, conscious and active participation” refers to our relationships at home, work and recreation. It refers to our response to God who is present and active in every aspect of our lives. “Full, conscious and active participation” means that we give ourselves totally to whatever we are doing at any particular moment.

During Jesus’ walk to Emmaus with two disciples, they invited him to come and stay with them. He did. During their meal together, “*their eyes were opened*” and they recognized who he really was—the risen Messiah. Later when he disappeared from their midst, they said to each other: “*Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened for us the scriptures?*” (Lk 24:13-32). Each of us would do well to often pray that during our participation in the Mass, our hearts will burn within us as we listen to God’s Word, and the eyes of our souls will be opened so that we recognize the awesome gift we receive at Mass.©

A more comprehensive explanation on the Mass can be found on our parish website [www.ascensioncatholic.net](http://www.ascensioncatholic.net). On the homepage, to Fr. Tobin’s writings, then go to *Step by Step Explanation of the Mass*.

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