



A Walk Through the Mass: A Step-by-Step Explanation

The Mass is the ritual Catholics celebrate in response to Jesus' command to "do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). One of the basic, distinctive marks of ritual prayer is that Catholics know what is going to happen next. We do things over and over. When the priest says, "The Lord be with you," without any thought or hesitation the congregation responds, "And with your Spirit." The priest says, "Let us pray," and the congregation stands up.

Our daily lives have their rituals also: There are set ways of greeting people, eating, responding to a text. And when we are accustomed to a certain way of doing things, we seldom ask why we do it that way. In the Eucharist, too, we have many ritual actions which we perform without asking why.

What is the Mass?

A good way to describe the Mass is to say that it is Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday made sacramentally present today in ritual. It is not merely a meal which reminds us of the Last Supper, or a Passion play which helps recall Good Friday, or a Sunrise Service which celebrates the Lord's Resurrection. The Mass is, therefore, our opportunity as Catholics to praise and thank God for the gift of our salvation in Christ Jesus. In short, the Mass is one way in which we share in the Paschal Mystery (the Passion, Death and Resurrection) of Christ.

The basic "shape" of the ritual of the Mass can be described as a meal. This is not to say it is "just another meal" or that we are ignoring the Mass as sacrifice. Not at all.

When friends gather for a meal, they sit and talk. Eventually they move to the table, say grace, pass the food and eat and drink, and finally take their leave and go home. On our walk through the Mass, we will follow this same map: we will see ritual acts of 1) gathering, 2) storytelling, 3) meal sharing, and 4) commissioning.



GATHERING (The Introductory Rites)

Coming together and forming community is at the heart of our Sunday worship. The reason behind each of the ritual actions of the first part of the Mass can be found in this word: gathering. The purpose of these rites is to bring us together into one Body, ready to listen and break bread together. Note that God is the one who has summoned us to this celebration of the Eucharist.

Genuflection. In medieval Europe, it was a custom to go down on one knee (to genuflect) before a king or person of

rank. This practice gradually entered the Church and people began to genuflect to the presence of Christ in the tabernacle before entering the pew. If the tabernacle is not located in the sanctuary, it is proper for members of the assembly to express their reverence for the altar by bowing to it before entering the pew.

Posture, song. When the Mass begins everyone stands up. Standing is the posture of the Christian at prayer that expresses our attentiveness to the Word of God and our readiness to carry it out. Often, we begin by singing together to unite our voices in a common word.

Greeting. We begin with the sign of the cross, reminding ourselves of our Baptism, and then the priest will greet us, saying, "The Lord be with you." This prayer reminds us of Christ's declaration that "... where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). The ritual response to this greeting is always the formula, "And with your spirit," which acknowledges that the priest has received the Spirit of God through his ordination.

Penitential Rite. In this Rite we are invited to call to mind our sins and the one (the Lord) sent to save us from the power of sin. While this Rite lacks the efficacy of sacramental absolution, we believe that through the reception of Holy Communion our less serious (venial) sins are forgiven.

Glory to God. Just as the angels proclaimed the praise of God at the birth of Christ, saying "Glory to God in the Highest" (Luke 2:13-14), we make our own declaration of praise of the Holy Trinity in singing or reciting the hymn, "Glory to God."

Opening Prayer. At the close of this first part of the Mass the priest will ask us to join our minds in prayer with the invitation, "Let us pray." As the priest pauses, we offer our intentions. Then he will collect them all into one prayer, to which we all respond "Amen," a Hebrew word for "So be it."



STORYTELLING (Liturgy of the Word)

Liturgy of the Word. When we gather at a friend's home for a meal, we almost always begin with conversation, telling our stories. At Mass, after the gathering rites, we sit down and listen as readings from the Word of God are proclaimed. They are the stories of God's people.

Three readings and a psalm. On Sundays, there are three readings from the Bible. The first reading will be from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season). We recall the origins of the covenants God made with our ancestors in faith. The first reading often relates to the Gospel selection of the day and will give background and an insight into the meaning of what Jesus will do in the Gospel. Then we will sing or recite a psalm—a song from God's own inspired hymnal, the Book of Psalms. The second reading will usually be from one of the letters of Paul or another apostolic writing. The third reading will be taken from one of the four Gospels.

Standing for the Gospel. Because of the unique presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel, it has long been the custom to stand in attentive reverence to hear these words. The priest will again greet us with "The Lord be with you." He then introduces the Gospel reading while marking a small cross on his forehead, lips and heart with his thumb while praying silently that God cleans his mind and his heart so that his lips may worthily proclaim the Gospel. In many places, the congregation performs this ritual action along with the priest. The Gospel reading concludes with the ritual formula "The Gospel of the Lord" and we respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," again proclaiming our faith in the presence of Christ in the Word.

Homily. Then we sit for the homily. Given by one who is ordained, the homily is an act of worship rooted in the texts of the Mass and Scripture, especially the readings that have just been proclaimed.

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The homily takes that word and brings it into our life today.

Creed. On Sundays we stand and together recite the Nicene or Apostles' Creed. The recitation is both a series of core truths we believe as Catholics, and a statement of our faith in the Word we have heard proclaimed in the Scripture and the homily.

Universal Prayer. We offer prayers for the needs and the salvation of all the world. The petitions usually fall into four categories: the Church, nations and their leaders, people in special need, and the local needs of our parish.



MEAL SHARING (Liturgy of the Eucharist)

After the readings, we move to the altar for the sacred meal of sacrifice, sharing, and thanksgiving. As at a meal in the home of a friend, we 1) set the table, 2) say grace and 3) share the food (we eat and drink). At Mass these ritual actions are called 1) the Preparation of the Altar and Gifts, 2) the Eucharistic Prayer, 3) the Communion Rite.

Preparation of the Altar and Gifts

The early Christians brought bread and wine from their homes to the church to be used for the Mass and to be given to the clergy and the poor. Today, a similar offering for the parish and the poor is made with our monetary contributions.

The priest receives bread and wine brought forward by members of the congregation, keeping the spiritual efficacy and significance of the early church offerings.

He then mixes water with the wine and washes his hands. (Mixing water with wine and washing hands are things all Jews did at meals in Jesus' day.)

Finally, he invites us to pray that the sacrifice be acceptable to God. We respond "Amen" to the Prayer Over the Gifts.

The Eucharistic Prayer

The prayer that follows is addressed to the Father and brings us to the very center of the Mass and the heart of our faith. While the words of the prayer vary from Sunday to Sunday, the prayer always has this structure: 1) We call upon God to remember all the wonderful saving deeds of our history. 2) We recall the central event in our history, Jesus Christ, and in particular the memorial He left us on the night before He died. We recall His Passion, Death and Resurrection. 3) After gratefully

calling to mind all the wonderful saving acts God has done for us in the past, we petition God to continue those deeds of Christ in the present: We pray that we may become one Body, one spirit in Christ.

Invitation. The prayer begins with a dialogue between the leader and the assembly. First, the priest greets us with "The Lord be with you." He then asks if we are ready and willing to approach the table and to renew our baptismal commitment, offering ourselves to God: "Lift up your hearts." And we say that we are prepared to do so: "We lift them up to the Lord." We are invited to give thanks to the Lord our God. And we respond: "It is right and just."

To "give thanks" translates the traditional Greek verb that now names the whole action: Eucharist.

Institution Narrative: Consecration.

The priest continues the prayer, giving praise and thanks, and calling upon the Holy Spirit to change our gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. He then recalls the events of the Last Supper—the institution of the Eucharist. At this important moment in the prayer, we proclaim the mystery of faith. The priest continues recalling the wonderful deeds of salvation: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ.

Prayer for unity and intercessions.

The grateful memory of God's salvation leads us to make a bold petition, our main petition at every Eucharist: We pray for unity. To this petition we add prayers for the bishop of Rome and for the bishop of the local Church; we pray for the living and the dead as well as ourselves that through the intercession of the saints we may one day arrive at the table in heaven.

We look forward to that glorious day and raise our voices with those of all the saints who have gone before us as the priest raises the consecrated bread and wine and offers a doxology, a prayer of glory to God in the name of Christ: "Through him, and with him, and in him, / O God, almighty Father, / in the unity of the Holy Spirit, / all glory and honor is yours, / for ever and ever." Our "Amen" to this prayer acclaims our assent and participation in the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

The Communion Rite

Our Father and Sign of Peace. We prepare to eat and drink at the Lord's Table with those words taught us by Jesus: "Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Keenly aware that

communion (the word means "union with") is the source of our reconciliation and union with God and with one another; we make a gesture of union and forgiveness with those around us and offer them the Sign of Peace.

Invitation to Communion. The priest then shows us the Body of Christ and invites us to come to the table echoing the words of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God..." We respond, "Lord, I am not worthy...", as the Centurion did when he asked Jesus to cure his servant (Matthew 8:8). None of us, on our own, are worthy to embrace the fullness of Christ. It is only through the love and mercy of God bestowed upon us that we become worthy to receive. The members of the assembly now approach the altar in procession.

Communion. As God fed our ancestors in the desert on their pilgrimage, so God gives us food for our journey. We approach the minister who gives us the Eucharist with the words "The Body of Christ," and we respond, "Amen." During this procession we usually sing a hymn which unites our voices, minds and thoughts, even as the Body and Blood of Christ unites us into one Body. Then we pray silently in our hearts, thanking and praising God. The priest unites our prayers in the Prayer After Communion, to which we respond, "Amen."



COMMISSIONING (Concluding Rites)

The burdens we have laid down at the door of the church for this Eucharist, we know we must now bear again—but now strengthened by this Eucharist and this community.

Blessing and Dismissal. We bow our heads to receive a blessing. As the priest names the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we make the sign of the cross. The priest or deacon then dismisses the assembly: "Go in peace." And we give our liturgical "yes" by saying, "Thanks be to God."

Living the Eucharist in the world. We leave the assembly and the church building carrying Christ within us. What happens in our lives during the week gives deeper meaning to the ritual actions we have celebrated at Mass, whether it's family, work with poor or just plain work. It is only in relation to our daily lives that the full meaning of the ritual actions of the Mass becomes clear to us. We bring Christ to the world.