

# A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE ROMAN CATHOLIC MASS



By Stephen B. Kass

## **A GUIDE TO THE MASS**

It is important to begin with why we come to Mass in the first place. Hopefully the Mass is something more than a weekly obligation or something we “have to” do. The real purpose of Mass is to gather as faith community and to give thanks for the extraordinary gift God gave to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. We have been given an amazing gift through the Incarnation. Our natural response to this gift should be one of gratitude and thanksgiving for what God has done for us. This is what the Greek word *eucharistia* means – thanksgiving. When we gather at Mass, we come to give thanks for what God has done for us and to offer ourselves back to Him in gratitude. The Mass and all of its actions and gestures are directed toward this end.

There are four main parts of the Mass: The Introductory Rites, The Liturgy of the Word, The Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Concluding Rites. The two most important parts are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist because we believe that Christ is fully present to the gathered community in both Word (the readings) and Sacrament.

### **Part I - Introductory Rites**

The Introductory Rites consist of the procession, the greeting, the penitential rite, the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria* and the *Collect*. The purpose of these Mass parts is to prepare ourselves to for an encounter with Christ who is present to the community in the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist. If we were preparing to meet an important dignitary, it is likely that we would properly dispose ourselves before that meeting. The same is true at Mass. We are preparing for a real encounter with the Lord. Therefore, it is important to ensure we are ready to meet Him.

#### **The Procession**

Movement is very important in liturgy and the entrance sets the tone for the Mass and says we are a people on the move - a pilgrim people. Done with some decorum and care, we sing together in one voice. Note that in the entrance rite, there is a procession, covered by song and concluded with a prayer – we will see this form, three other times during the Mass.

Upon reaching the altar, all bow and the priest venerates the altar. We usually don't kiss inanimate objects but the celebrant kisses the altar because it symbolizes Jesus Christ whom we love and honor. In fact, of all the elements in the church, it is the altar that is the most important and the focal point of the liturgy.

After the entrance procession, the priest will invite the community to begin Mass by making the sign of the cross.

While many of us make the sign of the cross without even thinking, it is a very important gesture. It is a bodily form of prayer. When we invoke the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we begin the liturgy by calling on God's name and inviting His presence into our

midst. This gesture is intended to be an outward sign of an inward reality. Making the sign of the cross is a non-verbal form of prayer that testifies to our Christian faith; it is a visual message that is an outward display of our identity as Christians and speaks to the values we affirm. The sign of the cross is a Trinitarian expression of love that is traced across our bodies that should connect our inward beliefs with our actions.

### **The Greeting**

After the sign of the cross, the priest will greet the community with the words, "The Lord be with you." This is not another way of saying "good morning." It is an address to people who are called to an important role of discipleship and mission. The words "The Lord be with you..." are an assuring message that God will help us by making up for what we are lacking. Think of the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary – "Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you." These words assure us that God will help us to carry out His will. How do we respond to this call? We respond with, "And with your spirit." Similarly, this is not "good morning to you too father." The expression "and with your spirit" is addressed to the priest and refers not only to the gift of the spirit he received at his ordination but also to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Mass. The greeting of the priest and the response of the people are all about recognizing and requesting God's help in fulfilling our duties as Christians and responding in faith to His call.

### **The Penitential Rite**

The Penitential Act follows the greeting and is intended to prepare us to hear God's word in the readings and allowing it to take root in us. At the very beginning of the Mass, we recall our sins and place our trust in God's abiding mercy. Depending on the church you go to, you may hear different forms of the Penitential Rite, you may hear a longer form called the *Confiteor* or as we almost always pray at St Mary's – the three fold *Kyrie Eleison* which means "Lord have mercy." It is important to note that this penitential rite is not about how bad we are – it is about how good God is. We do not say – "For each time we have failed to love you...Lord have mercy.... Instead we say "You were sent to heal the contrite, Lord Have Mercy – You came to call all sinners – Christ Have Mercy – You are seated at the right hand of the father to intercede for us for us...Lord Have Mercy. In the Gospels, Jesus praises those who recognize their failings. And that is what is done at this point in the Mass. Our faith teaches us that this part of the Mass will free us from any venial sins we may have committed. Although, in fact, it is the entire Mass itself and the reception of Christ in the Eucharist that cleanses us from any non mortal sin.

### **The Gloria**

The Penitential Rite is followed on many Sundays by the Gloria. During the penitential rite, we give thanks for God's infinite mercy. During Gloria, we give thanks to God for the gift of His son through the miracle of the Incarnation. The Gloria is a hymn of praise that takes some of its words from Luke's Gospel as the angels appear to the shepherds in the field, announcing the birth of Christ. Like the shepherds, we celebrate through song, our upcoming, sacred encounter with Christ through Word and Sacrament. To prepare ourselves to hear His word and to receive Him through the readings and the Eucharist, we use the same words as the angels. Note that during Lent and Advent, the Gloria is omitted. This is because there is a more somber and subdued nature to the Mass during both of those liturgical seasons.

## **The Collect Prayer**

After the Gloria, the priest will say offer some introductory words of prayer and say “let us pray” – this is called the Collect. The Collect is where the priest “collects” the prayers of the community and along with his own and offers them to God. This prayer always has the form where it is addressed to the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. It is a simple prayer that is tied to the liturgical season and is meant to introduce the meaning and theme of the liturgy. If you listen to the words of the collect, you will get some insight into what the church is trying to teach through the liturgy on that given Sunday. The purpose of the Collect is two-fold - it ends the entrance rite and secondly, it readies us to hear God’s word in the Liturgy of the Word.

The Collect concludes the Introductory Rites. The next part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word.

## **Part II -The Liturgy of the Word**

It makes some sense to talk a little about the Lectionary and the cycle of readings we hear at Mass. The Mass readings are organized into a 3 year Cycle, which are called years A, B and C. During Year A, most of the Gospel readings are from Matthew, Year B is Mark and in Year C we hear from Luke. If you follow the readings each week, you will see that during Ordinary Time, we move through each Gospel from beginning to end. John is read during Easter, major feasts, and during summer of the B cycle because Mark is the shortest of Gospels. On Sundays, during the Liturgy of the Word, we have thee readings: One from the Old Testament, a reading from one of Paul’s letters and then the Gospel. In between the Old Testament and the Epistle, a responsorial Psalm is sung.

It is important to note that hearing the Word of God at Mass is not the same as reading it at home. At Mass, we celebrate the Word. We are not at Mass as much to learn something, like we do in Bible study, as we are to encounter Christ, who is present in the Scriptures. The Liturgy is Scripture’s native home. This is not to discount private study, but it is important to remember the Church, as a community gathered together, is best place to hear scripture.

## **First Reading**

The first reading is usually taken from the Old Testament, which prepares us to listen to the Gospel. During Ordinary Time, the Old Testament almost always corresponds to the Gospel reading. One theologian said that the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. There is a synergy between these two readings where the first reading introduces the themes that will be heard in the Gospel reading. During the Easter season, the first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles.

After the reading, there is a pause for silence to briefly reflect on what we have just heard of God's word. This just like the pause after the priest says “Let Us Pray” during the Collect. We pause for just a moment in prayer and we give thanks for God’s saving plan for us by saying “Thanks be to God.” The cantor then mounts the ambo and proclaims the responsorial psalm.

## **Second Reading**

After the Psalm, the lector proclaims the second reading, which is a non-Gospel reading from the New Testament. This can be from one of Paul's letters, the Book of Revelation, or one of the other epistles. During Ordinary Time, this reading is rarely coordinated with Gospel, but during Advent, Lent, Christmas and Easter they are. During Ordinary Time, we move semi-sequentially through one of these non-Gospels. While this reading may not correspond to the Gospel reading, the idea is to use this time to hear how these other New Testament writers encourage us to live the life of Christ.

## **The Gospel**

The culmination of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel reading. This is ritualized in a more elaborate fashion, as the Gospel is only proclaimed by an ordained minister (a priest or a deacon) who is flanked by servers holding candles. The Book of the Gospels is a symbol of Christ and therefore it, like the altar, is venerated with a kiss by the deacon or the priest. We also stand at this point because it is a form and gesture of reverence to Christ who is our King and is present to us in the Gospels. We trace the sign of the cross on foreheads, lips and chest to pray that God's word be in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts. The proclamation of the Gospel has a most special place because it is our primary source of information about the life of Christ. The Gospel readings are something special and set apart from the other readings, which is why we attach special reverence to this part of the Liturgy of the Word as we believe it is Christ speaking directly to us. This is why the community responds to the readings with, "Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ."

## **The Homily**

After the Gospel reading, the priest or deacon offers a homily as a way to open the scriptures and interpret how the word of God applies to us today as a community of faith. The effect of the homily is not so much the work of the priest as it is the work of the spirit working through the priest – which is, in part, why the community's response to the priest is often "and with your spirit." The homily is not supposed to be about flash and great oratory skills, it is often about our attentiveness to that whispering sound that is often the voice of God who speaks to our hearts through the ministry of others.

## **The Nicene Creed**

We now stand to make our profession of faith – the Nicene Creed. The word creed comes from the Latin word *Credo* which means, "I believe." It is at this point in the Mass that we stand together and state exactly what it is that we believe. There are four things that we profess faith in through the Creed: God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Spirit, and the Church. The Creed we recite today has roots going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and has been proclaimed for over 1,600 years. In the Creed, we declare our unity with Christ and His Church and it is in the next part of the Mass, the Eucharist, where we actually achieve that unity bodily through communion.

The final part of the Liturgy of the Word is the Prayer of the Faithful or the General Intercessions. Here the Church presents a sequence of petitions and prayers in the form of intentions. These intentions address 4 needs: 1) the needs of Church, 2) public authorities

and salvation of world, 3) those oppressed by any need and 4) for the local community. We present the needs of the world before God so we become more aware of them – not God. He already knows what they are! This part of the Mass creates space for all of us to pray for those in need and helps all of us, collectively, to embrace our role as a priestly people and pray together.

### **Part III - Liturgy of the Eucharist**

#### **The Offertory/Presentation of the Gifts**

The Mass and specifically the Eucharist can be described as a meal, a sacrifice and an encounter with the Risen Lord. Every sacrifice begins with an offering. And that is what we do in this part of the Mass when we bring our gifts to the altar. We bring both spiritual and material gifts, we bring what we have and what we are and acknowledge that it all comes from God and belongs to God. Here, we bring bread and wine to the altar and take up a collection for the poor and the needs of the parish. In the past, some thought money should not be a part of liturgy, but in the early church, gifts were always gathered for those in need from the assembled community and we do the same here. Music also takes place here. Similar to the entrance procession, there is an action, covered by a song and concluded by a prayer. During the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to His disciples. Note the four verbs: Take, Bless, Break and Give. These four Eucharistic verbs are replicated here in the liturgy. During the offertory, our gifts are brought to the altar where the celebrant will take the gifts that we offer to him and begin the process where they will be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

#### **The Preparation of the Gifts**

While the collection is taken up, a series of actions take place where the priest will prepare the altar with the gifts of bread and wine that have been brought up. You will see the priest mix a little water with the wine. This is done for two reasons. First, there is historical connection with the people and culture during the time of Jesus. Water was often mixed with wine during public celebrations to dilute it, as wine was often stored in a concentrated form. But it also is symbolic of Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the Gospel of John relates that blood and water flowed from the side of Christ when his side was pierced with a lance. The priest pronounces two blessings – one for the bread and one for the wine. Here, he is doing what Jesus did at the Last Supper. The priest will then pray that our mutual sacrifice may be acceptable to God, at which point the community stands and says "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name for our good and the good of all His holy Church." This is because we ask God to transform not only the gifts, but ourselves too. Here, we join ourselves to Christ's offering which is the whole point of the Mass - to become one with Christ. Together, with the priest, we offer our lives back to God. Now we are ready for the celebration of the Eucharist where Christ becomes really present to us.

#### **The Preface and the Sanctus**

What follows is called the Preface. We call this the preface because it precedes the most important prayers during the Mass – the Eucharistic Prayer. During the preface, the priest prepares the minds of the people to receive Christ by saying, “Lift up your hearts!” And we respond in kind. The preface concludes by the priest and the community affirming that giving thanks to God is the right and proper thing to do. Note the theme of gratitude here, this is appropriate, since the word Eucharist itself means thanksgiving.

Next we sing the Sanctus or Holy Holy Holy, where we exalt the thrice-holy God. Here we remind ourselves that at this point in the Mass, that heaven and earth are joined. With Christ, heaven came to earth in form of a man and through his ascension, human nature has been elevated to glory. It is Christ who becomes the intersection of heaven and earth and we accompany Our Lord to the heavenly Jerusalem with the same words that He was greeted with on Palm Sunday as he entered the holy city for the last time. At this point, we kneel in adoration of Our Lord as we begin the most sacred portion of the Mass – the Eucharistic Prayer.

### **The Eucharistic Prayer**

This next part of the Mass is what is referred to as the “center and summit” of the entire celebration -The Eucharistic Prayer. It is the high point because, here, the priest does what Jesus did: he takes the bread, blesses it and declares it to be the Body of Christ. There are four primary Eucharistic Prayers that are used and six others that are used on special occasions such as Masses of Reconciliation and Masses with Children. They all differ in style and content but are the same in solemnity and dignity. Every Eucharistic Prayer has the same elements and two central ideas: Invocation and Remembrance. Specifically, during the invocation, we call upon the action of the Holy Spirit to change the gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ. We also remember and re-present the events of the Last Supper by recalling what Christ did with his apostles on the last night of His life.

You will know the invocation part of the Eucharistic Prayer by the language the priest uses in asking the Holy Spirit to make the gifts on the altar holy. The gifts are not changed by human effort; it is only through and by God that this transformation occurs just as it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the word became flesh in the womb of Mary. It is the Spirit that changes the bread and wine and the same Spirit that changes us as well.

During what is called the Institution Narrative part of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Last Supper is not simply recalled as a past event that happened 2,000 years ago. It is re-presented and brought forward in time to the here and now. The Eucharist has the power to make present the event it recalls, not just a memory but also a reality, just as Jesus is really present in the consecrated bread and wine. We are not just bystanders at Calvary, we are indeed there. After the host and the chalice are raised, bells will be rung in some churches to let the community know that Christ has been made present in the consecrated bread and wine.

After the Institution Narrative, the priest invites the community to acclaim the Mystery of our faith. We call this the Memorial Acclamation because our words are directed to Christ

Himself and what we believe about Him. Note the language of the priest and community here is expressed as a people speaking directly to Jesus Christ who is present to the community through the Eucharist. There are three responses that may be used: 1) *"We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again."* When we profess Christ's resurrection we are saying we believe he rose from the dead and lives today. We believe he will come again in glory at the end of time., 2) *"When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord, until you come again."* When we proclaim Christ's death we profess publicly that we believe he died on the Cross and will come again. The text for the first two options is drawn directly from 1 Corinthians 11:26, and 3) *"Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free."* In this acclamation, we profess that we believe Christ has freed us from sin by his Dying and Rising. The text for the third option is from John 4:42 and Galatians 5:1.

The intercessions follow the Memorial Acclamation. During the intercessions, the offering on the altar is made on behalf of all members of the Church, those living and those deceased as well. During this part of the Mass, we add our prayers to the whole of God's Church, the saints, the pope, and our bishop. The grand finale of the Eucharistic Prayer is when priest begins to pray these words: "Through Him, With Him and In Him..." Our response of "Amen" affirms the glory of God in thanks for His transformation of the gifts and our own transformation too. This Great Amen is the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer and what follows is the Communion Rite.

### **The Communion Rite**

So far, we have taken the bread and we have blessed it. Now, we shall break it and give the bread during the Communion Rite. This Rite has four parts: The Lord's Prayer, The Sign of Peace, the Preparation and Reception of Communion and the Prayer after communion.

At this point, we stand and pray the prayer Our Lord taught us. There are two important parts of the Lord's Prayer that are most relevant for our reception of the Eucharist. The first is our request for daily bread where we recognize our daily need to be nourished by Body of Christ and the second is the petition for us to be forgiven of our sins in the same measure that we forgive others. With this, and the sign of peace that follows, we realize we can't approach the table of the Lord unless we are at peace with one another. This is why the sign of peace immediately follows the Lord's Prayer. Just like the cross itself, our communion is not only vertically with Jesus Christ, there is a horizontal dimension as well that reflects our relationship with others. We express this need by exchanging the sign of peace. Following the Lord's Prayer, we say, "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever." This is what is known as a doxology, or a short hymn of praise added to the end of a prayer. This doxology was added to the end of the Lord's Prayer by early Christian communities to give a resounding end to the Lord's Prayer.

After the sign of peace, we sing the *Agnus Dei* or Lamb of God. These words recall the words of John the Baptist who exclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God" as Jesus approaches. The Lamb of God reminds us of the Paschal Lambs that were sacrificed for Passover and mirrors Christ's death on the cross. Up to now, the gifts have been taken and blessed and

now the host is broken as Christ's body was broken on the cross following Passover. You will see this when the priest elevates the host and breaks it apart. The image of Christ as the Lamb of God also comes from the Book of Revelation (Rev 5:6) that describes a lamb that appears to have been slain and yet is alive and triumphant and rules over the world. Later in Revelation (Rev 19:6-9), the faithful are called to join the wedding feast of the Lamb. It is through this feast that the Christ, the Lamb of God, accomplishes a marriage of heaven and earth, and God and Church. This is the entire meaning of Holy Communion and why we sing the *Agnus Dei* right before communion.

At the end of the *Agnus Dei*, we say "Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." We say this not to denigrate ourselves but rather to mirror the faith expressed by a Roman centurion (Matt 8:8) who asked that Jesus enter his home to heal his servant. The centurion's words moved and amazed Jesus and like the centurion, we also ask for mercy and for healing.

### **Communion**

So far, the Eucharistic gifts have been taken, blessed, and broken. The final Eucharistic act is the giving of these gifts back to the assembled community. During the communion rite, we follow the same schema we observed during the entrance rite. A procession, covered by a song or chant and then ended with a prayer. There are a couple of important things to note about communion. First, we believe that the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ are equally and fully present in both the consecrated bread and the wine. We are not getting "half" of communion by only receiving one or the other. It is also proper to show reverence when receiving communion. If we believe that Jesus Christ is fully present in the bread and wine, it is only fitting that we bow before we receive Him.

After communion, the priest will offer a brief prayer that is connected to the theme of the liturgy that was just celebrated. This concludes the Communion Rite but it is not the end of Mass.

### **Part IV - Concluding Rites**

After Communion, there is a final blessing and the priest or deacon will say "Go forth, the Mass is ended." This is actually where the word Mass comes from. In Latin it is: *Ite Missa Est*, which means, "Go forth, it is the sending." This reminds us that we are all called to be what we received in the Eucharist. While the liturgy may be concluding, we must remember that we are sent into the world as disciples to bring the Good News of Christ to others.