

# Understanding the Catholic Mass



## **The Catholic Mass: A True Sacrifice**

A Catholic Mass, which is a liturgical function, can only be held in a church or an oratory which had been consecrated or at least blessed. An oratory is a structure other than a church, set aside by ecclesiastical authority for prayer and the celebration of Catholic Mass.

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## **Silence is Golden**

Attention is the essence of prayer. If you arrive in church early enough, it will give you time to calm your mind and prepare for the sacrifice of the Mass. Of course, if you have children in tow, keeping them quiet out of respect for the other worshipers can be heroic. Turn cell phones off or put on vibrate/silent.

## **Entering the Church**

You will usually find the font with holy water at the entrance. Upon entering we dip our fingers into the holy water. With the dipped hand we make a sign of the cross over ourselves as a reminder of our baptism. When we enter the church or pass the tabernacle the normal gesture of reverence is to genuflect, that is, to bend the right knee until it reaches the ground. Genuflecting, of course can be quite an effort for those of us weakened at the knees. So, for some of us, we bow to express our reverence to the Lord. (*Genuflect with both knees on the ground during Exposition*)

## **Entrance Procession**

The Catholic Mass begins with the entrance procession. The entrance hymn is first of the four proper hymns sung during mass. The procession leads with the altar cross followed by the candles, the Book of Gospels, and lastly the priest. In certain solemn Catholic Masses, the censer leads the way with burning incense. The cross must be present at or near the altar of the Sacrifice. The cross depicts the sacrifice of the cross and made present in the altar. Upon reaching the altar, the servers, ministers and priest will make the reverential bow or genuflect in front of the tabernacle. The cross and the candles, if carried in the procession are placed in their holders near or on the altar. The priest then goes on to the altar and kisses it in reverence. He proceeds to sit and wait for the hymn to end.

## **Greetings**

After the hymn, with us standing, the priest and the faithful make the sign of the cross and the priest greets the faithful, usually with the traditional, "The Lord be with you." At this point the priest may also give a brief introduction to the Catholic Mass of the day.

## **The Penitential Rite in a Catholic Mass**

During the penitential rite, we reflect on our sins and ask God to forgive them. The most common invocation is, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." This is a general absolution and cannot replace going to the sacrament of confession. We cannot receive the Sacrament of Communion if did not confess a mortal sin beforehand. At this point the priest may also perform the blessing and sprinkling of water, to remind us of the actions and promises of baptism.

## **Gloria**

Gloria in Excelsis is Latin meaning, "Glory in the Highest." This is the Angelic Hymn or greater doxology and is an ancient Christian hymn of thanks, praise and triumph for redemption. Because of the joyful nature of the Gloria, it is omitted in more somber occasions, such as the Advent or Lent. During those seasons, the Catholic Mass takes on a simpler and more penitent character.



## **Opening Prayer**

Originally called the Collect, the priest now invites us to pray in silence.

## **Liturgy of the Word**

The Liturgy of the Word is the sequence of readings that prepares us for the Sacrament of Sacrifice. The readings are not optional. And not hearing the readings nor making any attempt to hear them would be to come unprepared for communion, just as we would be if we miss the reading altogether.

## **The Lectionary**

The Lectionary specifies the readings that are read in a certain date. The modern Lectionary is arranged on a complicated pattern with overlapping cycles of years. With certain exceptions, the Sunday Lectionary of the Catholic Mass repeats in a three-year cycle, whereas the Weekday Lectionary of the Catholic Mass repeats in a two-year cycle. Both started in 1969. The three readings every Sunday Catholic Mass are the first reading, normally from the Old Testament; the second from the Epistles of the New Testament; and the third from the Gospels. A Lector or a reader normally reads the first and second readings. The priest reads Gospel. The responsorial psalms are either read or sung between the readings. The first responsorial psalm is a varying antiphon and the second the Alleluia. The faithful sits until the Alleluia, and then rises to greet the Gospel. Although the first reading is supposed to reflect the Gospel, sometimes the connection may not be very obvious. The second reading is not chosen with any reference to the other readings.

## **Homily**

In the Homily, or the Sermon, the priest is expected to make sense of the 3 readings and the psalm, and to do that in less than 10 minutes. That is quite a daunting task! In reality, in the Catholic Mass, the priest is not expected to give a full explanation of one of the readings, let alone the three. However, the General Instruction does recommend that the homily reference some point from the readings or of another text from the Ordinary or from the Proper of the Catholic Mass of the day. The priest is also expected to take into account the mystery being celebrated and the needs of the listeners.

## **How to Listen To the Sermon**

The Scripture can be overwhelming for a lot of people. The best solution in order to understand the Sermon is to prepare ourselves before going to Catholic Mass. Get a Lectionary. Read the readings for the Catholic Mass and reflect on the meanings. This preparation will help us keep our minds in Church during the readings and through the Sermon.

## **Profession of Faith**

The Creed was added into the Catholic Mass about a thousand years ago in a desire to unite the people in proclaiming their loyalty to the faith before they begin to celebrate the Eucharist. Gradually the Creed became a standard part of the Catholic Mass. As a result of this intimate association with the liturgy and teaching of the Church, the Apostles' Creed has always been held to have the authority of an ex cathedra utterance. It is commonly taught that all points of doctrine contained in it are part of the Catholic Faith, and cannot be called in question under pain of heresy.

## **General Intercessions**

In the prayers of intercession we ask God for the needs of the Church; for public authorities and the salvation of the world; for those oppressed by any need; and for the local community. Typically the intentions are announced in the lectern but introduced by the priest. Also called the Prayer of the Faithful, at one stage in the evolution of the Catholic Mass, the marked the beginning of the "Mass of the Faithful." This was the secret ceremony that only baptized Catholics of good standing could attend. Strangers, catechumens and penitents were expected to leave at this point.



### **Preparation of the Gifts**

The Liturgy of the Eucharist now begins, which forms the central part of the liturgy due to its direct institution by Christ. The Offertory has always been considered one of the essential actions of the Catholic Mass although it looks like a passive and quiet moment. This is the rite by which the bread and wine are presented (offered) to God before they are consecrated.

### **Rite of Hand Washing**

The Rite of Hand Washing, or Lavabo, before celebrating the holy Liturgy originated from the practical precaution of cleanness and later interpreted also symbolically.

### **Prayer Over the Gifts**

"Pray, Brethren" breaks the stillness and silence after the Lavabo, as invitation to pray and claim ownership of the sacrifice.

### **Eucharistic Prayer**

#### **The Preface**

"The Lord be with you," is the oldest set of text in the Mass and is exchanged between the priest and the congregation. We are then invited to turn to the Lord in prayer. The Preface is an introductory prayer, which gives a specific reason for our thanksgiving.

#### **The Sanctus**

The Sanctus is the last part of the Preface in the Catholic Mass, sung in practically every rite by the people (or choir), or if recited, it needs a firm and exalted tone. It is one of the oldest elements of the Catholic Mass liturgy. Like the prophet Isaiah, we fall on our knees in awe, for we realize the presence of something greater than ourselves.

#### **Epiclisis**

Epiclisis is an invocation of God to send the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Specifically and unambiguously God is called on to transform the offering of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

#### **The Consecration**

Here the elements are consecrated and transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This is the key moment of the Catholic Mass. During the consecration the priest takes the bread and then the wine and repeats over them the words and action of our Lord during the Last Supper.

#### **Transubstantiation**

During the epiclisis or invocation, God is called upon to send the Holy Spirit and transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. During consecration, when the priest speaks, "This is my body," the substance of the bread is transformed into the Body of Jesus Christ. The priest then shows the Host to the people and places the consecrated Host on the paten. When the priest speaks, "This is my blood," the substance of the wine is transformed in the Blood of Jesus Christ. The priest shows the Chalice to the people and places the consecrated wine on the corporal.

#### **Memorial Acclamation**

After the Chalice has been shown to the people the priest invites the people to proclaim the Mystery of Faith.

#### **Remembrance**

After the memorial acclamation the priest invites us to "Call to mind" or remember the great events of our salvation, death, Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord, Jesus Christ.



## **Offering**

In that memory we offer the sacrifice, calling on God to offer the sacrifice in union with all the sacrifices in the past. In the offering, the miracle of transubstantiation is applied to our benefit when we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

## **Intercessions**

The priest intercedes with the Father. We pray for those who have departed and we pray "for us sinners."

## **Final Doxology**

The priest lifts the Host and the Chalice proclaiming the doxology, the words of praise linking the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This concludes the Eucharistic Prayer.

## **Communion Rite**

### **The Our Father**

The communion rite begins with the Our Father.

### **Holding Hands During the Our Father**

While there are no directions as to the posture of the faithful, the rubrics clearly direct the priest and any concelebrants to pray the Our Father with hands extended – so they at least should not hold hands. One could argue that holding hands expresses the family union of the Church. But our singing or reciting the prayer in unison already expresses this element. The act of holding hands usually emphasizes group or personal unity from the human or physical point of view and is thus more typical of the spontaneity of small groups. Hence it does not always transfer well into the context of larger gatherings where some people feel uncomfortable and a bit imposed upon when doing so. The use of this practice during the Our Father could detract and distract from the prayer's God-directed sense of adoration and petition, as explained in *Nos. 2777-2865* of the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, in favor of a more horizontal and merely human meaning. For all of these reasons, no one should have any qualms about not participating in this gesture if disinclined to do so. They will be simply following the universal customs of the Church, and should not be accused of being a cause of disharmony. A different case is the practice in which some people adopt the "orantes" posture during the Our Father, praying like the priest, with hands extended. Despite appearances, this gesture is not, strictly speaking, a case of the laity trying to usurp priestly functions. The Our Father is the prayer of the entire assembly and not a priestly or presidential prayer. In fact, it is perhaps the only case when the rubrics direct the priest to pray with arms extended in a prayer that he does not say alone or only with other priests. Therefore, in the case of the Our Father, the orantes posture expresses the prayer directed to God by his children. This posture was, after all, the normal way Christians prayed for a millennium.

## **Embolism**

The priest picks up the last petition to deliver us from every evil.

## **The Sign of Peace**

The invitation to share the sign of peace among the congregation the priest is not authorized to leave the sanctuary. This part almost jars the solemnity of the Eucharistic Prayer in the Catholic Mass back to earth.

## **The Fraction**

The Breaking of the Bread is the oldest name for the Eucharistic liturgy, going back to the apostolic days, following Christ's breaking of the Bread at the Last supper.



### **The Commingling**

When the priest breaks the Bread he also drops a small piece of the Host into the Chalice, which is called Commingling. There are two possible origins of this rite. It was customary to reserve a fraction of the Host from each day's Catholic Mass and keep it until the next Catholic Mass. Then it would be brought to the altar and mingled with the newly consecrated Chalice. The other custom was practiced in Rome where the pope would send particles of the Host from his Catholic Mass to every church in the city so they could be mingled with the Blessed Sacrament in each church.

### **Agnus Dei**

While the priest is going about the breaking of the bread and commingling, the congregation or choir sings the "Lamb of God."

### **Communion**

Communion is the actual reception of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. It is the Church doctrine that Holy Communion is morally necessary for salvation. Thus, without this sacrament it would be very difficult to resist grave temptations and avoid grievous sin. To receive you should bow your head in reverence.

### **Silence after Communion**

After receiving communion we meditate and contemplate on the Sacrament of Holy Communion. When communion has been distributed the priest, deacons and the extra-ordinary ministers of the Eucharist return the vessels to the altar. The remaining Hosts are collected into one ciborium. If the Sacred Blood is used the remaining Species must be consumed. The paten, ciborium and chalice are then purified. Although not dictated by the General Instructions, it is a common practice for the congregation to kneel while the practical necessity of clearing the Sacred Vessels is going on. It is customary to stay kneeling until either the priest sits or the ciborium of the remaining Host is returned into the tabernacle.

### **Prayer after Communion**

After the silence or song following Communion or after the purification of the vessels, the priest then invites the faithful to pray, which closes the Communion rite.

### **Concluding Rite**

#### **Announcements**

This brings to attention certain announcements from the parish.

### **Dismissal**

For the last time the priest and the people exchange greetings.

### **The Catholic Mass ends.**

