

THE MASS EXPLAINED



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“And on that day which is called after the Sun, all who are in the town and in the country gather together for a communal celebration ... and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read as long as time permits. After the reader has finished his task, the presiding official gives an address, urgently admonishing his hearers to practise these beautiful teachings in their lives. Then all stand up together and recite prayers. Following the prayers as has been shown above, the bread and wine are brought and the one presiding offers up prayers and thanks, as much as in him lies. The people chime in with “Amen”. Then takes place the distribution to all attending of the things over which the thanksgiving has been spoken. The Deacons bring a portion to the absent. Besides those who are well-to-do give whatever they will. All that is gathered is deposited with the one presiding, who therewith helps orphans and widows ...”

How blest we are to have an account of the Mass by St. Justin in 150 AD. In fact, it is a double account, since the one printed above was preceded by another description of Mass following a baptism. From the two accounts, the following structure of the Mass already appears:

1. Readings from Apostles.
2. Homily.
3. Prayers of Intercession.
4. Kiss of Peace.
5. Eucharistic Prayer and Great Amen.
6. Communion under both kinds.
7. Gifts collected for the poor.

As Christians emerged from the catacombs and basilicas were built, the structure of the Mass developed. This was especially so after the

conversion of the Emperor Constantine (c.300 AD) and much ceremonial was added to the Mass.

These developments continued until the Council of Trent in 1545 when ceremonies were prescribed down to the smallest detail.

Vatican II, in its liturgical reforms, tried to recover something of the clarity and simplicity described by St. Justin. It makes the presiding role of the Priest much more challenging because now he is presiding over the various ministries.

The day of celebration has had a number of different names. 'Sunday' comes from 'dies solis' and so Christians likened God and the Resurrection to the Rising Sun. It was also known as 'First Day' because many of the Lord's appearances were on the first day of the week. For some time, it was known as 'The Lord's Day' because, after His death, Jesus rose and so proved Himself to be 'The Lord'. The 'Eighth Day' was another name, in the early church, depending on whether you counted from the 'first' or 'last' day of the week.

Byzantine and Russian Christians call it 'Resurrection Day'.

The word 'Mass' comes from the Latin 'mitto, mittere' and means 'sending forth'. It came from the dismissal: 'Ite missa est.'

Our celebration is divided into four parts:

1. **INTRODUCTORY RITES** - from the beginning of Mass to the end of the Collect;
2. **LITURGY OF THE WORD** - from the first reading to the Prayers of the Faithful;
3. **LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST** - from the Offertory to the Post Communion;
4. **CONCLUDING RITES** - announcements, blessing, dismissal, hymn.

INTRODUCTORY RITES

Entrance Hymn

This accompanies the procession and unites us in song.

Veneration of the Altar

It is the salutation of the place where the Eucharist is to be celebrated and is to be found in our own liturgy as early as the 4th century.

Incensation of the Altar

This is a mark of honour and symbolises our prayers rising to God.

Sign of the Cross

This reminds us of Christ who died on the Cross and also the Trinity. It started as a small signing but became a fuller sign in the large basilicas.

The Greeting

We have three forms of greeting, all taken from Scripture. The response 'And with your Spirit' prays that the Spirit of the Lord be renewed in each person.

Introduction

Briefly touches on the main theme and invites us to open and dispose our hearts to the Lord's forgiveness and receive Him in Word and Sacrament.

Penitential Act

Sin is not just a private affair; we offend against God and our neighbour and so, before offering our gift, we ask forgiveness.

Absolution

Cleansed in heart and mind, we begin our celebration.

Lord, have mercy

This comes from the Eastern liturgy and was the response to Prayers of the Faithful at this part of the Mass. These were discontinued in 6th century but the three responses remained. Mass was in Greek until 250 AD.

Glory to God

This is a hymn in honour of the birth of Christ composed in the 5th century. From the 11th century, it was extended to all Sundays and feasts, except Lent and Advent.

Collect

This is the first of three Presidential Prayers; the other two are Prayers over the Gifts and the Post-Communion Prayer. Our spiritual needs are 'collected' and presented to the Father. The response by the people 'Amen' is a Hebrew word conveying the assent of the people.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

The word 'liturgy' is a Greek word, meaning literally 'the work of the people'. Over the centuries, it has come to mean the form of service or regular ritual of the Church. It is good to remind ourselves of the words of Vatican II, 'the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the Table of God's Word.'

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament foreshadows and prepares us for the New. Around 400 texts are found in the Old Testament referring to Christ. As St. Augustine says: 'the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is revealed in the New.' The events of the past have a meaning for us today. We are the new Israel, in exile on earth, on our journey to the Promised Land.

In our Lectionary, the theme of the Old Testament lesson is often chosen to chime with and prepare us for the Gospel, in which it finds its fulfilment.

Responsorial Psalm

Having listened to God's Word, we now respond to its message echoed by the Psalm. These are the hymns of the Old Testament and, when possible, should be sung. There are 150, and represent cries of joy, pain, repentance, praise, thanksgiving.

New Testament Lesson

The second reading is more concerned with Christian living and is often a continuous passage read over the course of a number of weeks. This means that its message will not always be the same as that of the other readings; nevertheless, it is important that the Word of God evokes a response in us as it challenges our way of living.

We acknowledge that it is God Himself who speaks to us as the reader ends each lesson by saying: 'The Word of the Lord'.

Alleluia Verse

This is a word of greeting and welcome to Christ who is to speak to us through the words of the Gospel. It remains in Hebrew and means: 'Praise God'. It originated at the Easter Mass and then spread to every Sunday Mass (except Lent) since each Sunday is a 'little Easter'. Its words are usually from the Reading or the Gospel and so underline its message.

Gospel

The last of the three readings holds the highest rank since it is always about Christ. The word, Gospel, means 'Good News' since it represents the fulfilment of the promise in Christ and His victory over sin and death. We show our respect in many ways. The book will be carried in the entrance procession and placed on the altar as a sign of Christ coming among His people. The Gospel procession may be accompanied by incense and acolytes. It is the Priest or the Deacon who reads the Gospel and the people stand. We sign ourselves with a cross on the forehead (believing the Word), lips (proclaiming the Word), and heart (living the Word). The Priest or Deacon kisses the book as a further sign of reverence whilst the people address Christ directly, saying: 'Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ'.

Homily

Once again, this is from a Greek word meaning 'the same'. That is to say that the homily should be taken from the Scriptures that have been read and so break the message of the Word for the people. The Word is not just a record of past events but is meant to have an immediate bearing on our lives, summoning us to a present decision.

Creed

This word comes from the Latin 'credo' expressing our belief. It is a resumé of salvation history expressing our belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed dates from the 4th century and was formulated by the bishops at the first Council to be held after the persecutions. The Apostles' Creed was the baptismal commitment used from the time of the Apostles.

Prayers of the Faithful

Already there at the time of St. Justin and the earliest example of Bidding Prayers are those in the liturgy of Good Friday. During the Middle Ages, these prayers fell into disuse and were revived by the Vatican Council. They should take the form of propositions and not prayers - offered for the Church and the world, and for local needs.

Before we come to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I wish to emphasise the parity between Word and Sacrament. They are a seamless robe and intimately interwoven in the life of the Church. Indeed, the Church finds the roots of its teaching on the Eucharist in the Scriptures.

Listen to these words of Caesarius of Arles written about the year 500 AD: 'Which is more important: the Word of the Lord or the Body of the Lord? If you would please me, you would answer both. Just as we are careful not to let slip the Body of the Lord from our hands, so we must take care not to let slip any part of the Word from our hearts.'

That is why Ambo and Altar are placed at exactly the same height in Brentwood Cathedral.

At the time of Jesus and after His death, the Christian Jews continued to meet in the synagogue but met in their homes for 'the breaking of bread' on the Lord's day. However, as time passed, the polemic between Jew and Christian became more acute and so Christians then held their own synagogue service in the same place as they were meeting to 'break bread'. Hence, the two main parts of the Mass 'Word' and 'Eucharist' came together.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

This comprises three parts:

1. Preparation of the Gifts
2. Eucharistic Prayer
3. Communion Rite

Preparation of the Gifts

The bread at Mass is known as a 'host' from the Latin 'hostia', meaning a sacrificial lamb. It is unleavened bread as at the Last Supper.

Wine is a sign of joy and, with it, the Priest mixes a drop of water as a sign of the coming together of the human and the divine.

At this point, a money collection is usually taken for the support of the Church and charitable giving. The bringing up of the gifts should be accompanied by an appropriate chant.

The two prayers that accompany the offering of the bread and the wine by the Priest are very beautiful and modelled on ancient Jewish blessing prayers. The Priest then washes his hands as part of a cleansing rite. After praying that our sacrifice may be acceptable, the Priest recites a prayer over the gifts asking God to sanctify and transform them.

Eucharistic Prayer

We now come to what Vatican II describes as 'the centre and climax' of the whole celebration (GI 54). It begins with the dialogue before the Preface and ends when the Priest holds up the host and chalice together.

We have four principal Eucharistic Prayers. The word, 'Eucharist' is a Greek word: 'Eu-Charis'. 'Eu' means 'good' and 'Charis' means 'gift', and so 'a good gift'.

Over the years, the word has come to mean 'thanksgiving', just as Jesus took bread and 'gave thanks'.

In our four Eucharistic Prayers, the words of institution by Jesus are the same - only the narrative in which they are set is different.

The first, known as 'The Roman Canon' has been used since the 4th century.

Eucharistic Prayer II is short, simple and clear. It is based on a text written by a Roman Priest called Hippolytus in the 3rd century.

Eucharistic Prayer number three is modelled on the Alexandrian Prayer of St. Basil and goes back to the 4th century.

The fourth Prayer, although a recent composition, is based on traditional material from oriental prayers. It is theologically rich and recalls the history of our salvation.

Any additional Eucharistic Prayers (and there are a number, such as for various needs and occasions and for penitential seasons) had to have the same overall structure, viz: thanksgiving and praise (Preface); Sanctus; Post Sanctus emphasising God's holiness and leading to the calling down of the Holy Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine; Institution Narrative and Consecration; recalling the Paschal Mystery; calling down the Spirit on God's people; Intercessions for the Church and the Dead; Doxology leading to Amen.

Preface Dialogue

Whereas other prayers in the Mass are just preceded by 'Let us pray', the great prayer of the Canon has a longer and very old exchange between Priest and people. This part goes back to almost apostolic times and remains unchanged in the liturgies of both East and West.

Preface

The word, of course, means 'that which goes before'. However, it is thought that our word comes from another root 'Fari' which means 'to make a speech'.

Sanctus

The words come from the Prophet Isaiah (Is 6.3) who had a vision of seraphs praising the Lord. Few texts have inspired such beautiful musical settings. The bell is rung to express joy and signal the approach of the consecration.

First Invocation

All four prayers begin with praise and thanksgiving and then invoke the Holy Spirit to come down and hallow these gifts. The Priest places his hands over the gifts as a sign of invoking the Holy Spirit.

Words of Institution

Here the word 'institution' can be understood as something 'new' established. The Passover meal was instituted at God's command to Moses in order to commemorate the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. It was this very action that Christ was going to use to perpetuate his sacrifice on Calvary.

The word 'sacrifice' comes from two Latin words: 'sacrum' meaning 'holy' and 'facere' meaning 'to make', and so the word means 'to make something holy'.

It was the perfect sacrifice on the Cross that united us once again with God. By His death, Jesus has brought us, the new chosen people, out of the slavery of sin through His blood on the Cross. It is the new and everlasting covenant as opposed to the Old Covenant. Which is why we say: 'This is My Body, this is My Blood.' Jesus Himself is the true and real Passover Lamb. Our Mass is not a repetition of Calvary but a re-presentation.

Father Francis Hastings in his book, 'Sunday celebration' suggests it may help our understanding if, in our modern world, we think of the words:

‘Action replay’. What you are seeing is an action from the past, brought into the present, which can never be repeated. But, in the case of the Mass, it continues to have its effect here and now.

The Risen Christ is now present in our midst and is shown to the people. The bell directs our attention to what is happening. The Priest repeats Christ’s command: ‘Do this in memory of me.’ and the people respond to this ‘Mystery of Faith’.

Second Invocation

We ask God to look with favour on our offerings as we recall the Lord’s Death and Resurrection.

The Intercessions

We celebrate the Eucharist in union with the whole Church in heaven and on earth and then express our unity with our Pope and our Bishop. We then make intercession for all who have died.

The Great Amen

On many occasions, we say ‘Amen’ in the Mass but this is known as the ‘Great Amen’. It marks the conclusion and high point of the Eucharistic Prayer as the Priest raises both host and chalice together. St. Augustine calls it our signature to the Mass and St. Jerome said that it used to resound all around the basilica like a thunderclap.

Communion

Holy Communion means union with Christ and union with one another. We prepare for it by the Lord’s Prayer and prayers that follow.

The Rite of Peace

This was in the Mass described by St. Justin in 150 AD. At that time, it took place at the Offertory but later was omitted and then restored by Vatican II.

The Breaking of Bread

We recall this is what Jesus did at the Last Supper and was considered so significant in the early Church that the Mass was known as ‘The

Breaking of Bread'. A small portion is put into the chalice containing the precious Blood and so emphasises the oneness of the Body and the Blood of Christ.

In the early Church, at the Pope's Mass, the Deacon would take part of the consecrated bread to other Churches in Rome to emphasise unity.

Holy Communion

The two formulas, 'The Body of Christ' and 'The Blood of Christ' can be found back in the 3rd century. As the people respond 'Amen', St. Ambrose would encourage them, saying: 'what you confess with your lips, keep in your heart'. It is a moment to pray that, as the Bread and Wine have been transformed, so may we be transformed.

It is good that Vatican II has restored receiving from the Chalice since it is a much fuller sign when we receive under both kinds.

Post Communion Prayer

We pray that what we have received in Word and Sacrament may have its effect in our lives.

CONCLUDING RITE

Blessing

A blessing asks for God's divine favour upon us and recalls Christ blessing the disciples before the Ascension. It has been an integral part of the Mass from the 13th century.

Dismissal

We are invited to 'Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by our life'.

Final Hymn

Concluding thought

I end with this moving passage from a book called, 'The Shape of the Liturgy' by Dom Gregory Dix:

“Do this in memory of me’ - 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. Men 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 bridegroom in a country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination, or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of a whole province or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness that a friend did not die of pneumonia; for the repentance of a sinner or for the settlement of a strike; while the lions roared at the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled Bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp - splendidly, for a canonisation - one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and people continue to gather together in order to carry out this command, ‘Do this in memory of me!’”

