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# **The Meaning of the Mass**

# THE MEANING OF THE MASS

## Part One: Procession and Introductory Rite

**RITE** = the prescribed (by the Church) words and actions about how the Sacraments, including Mass, are to be celebrated.

Note: Catholic Christians do not “make up” worship nor are we left to rely on the whim of pastors and others to create and innovate the Church’s Sunday prayer, but instead take to heart Jesus’ command to, “Do this in memory of me.” (Luke 22:19). The “this” is *saying and doing what Jesus sets as the standard* for Christian worship at the Last Supper, the first Mass.

Separately, several of the *Letters of St. Paul* and also *the Acts of the Apostles* provide clear Scriptural evidence that this is exactly how the earliest Christians understood common prayer.

### Procession

- Both Old Testament and New Testament processions signal God’s preparing to act for the good of the assembled community.
- Symbolic reminder of our spiritual journey to God. As the priest (and deacon) make their way to the altar, so are we every seeking to draw closer to God’s “throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16).
- Unifies the assembled community, focusing our attention to the task at hand; namely, to encounter the Living God in word (Scriptures) and action (Eucharist).

## **Sign of the Cross**

- Identifies us as belonging to the One True God Who graciously reveals Himself as He Is as an eternal procession of relations Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Prayer of blessing, invoking God's assistance and to protect us.
- Invites God into our lives and into our prayer (Mass)

TIP: Always make the Sign of the Cross with careful attention, reverence and intentionality.

## **Greeting**

- *Priest: The Lord be with you* = echoing the recorded greetings of St. Paul and earliest Christians, we also recall the ultimate truth that God summons us to mission of advancing His Kingdom in our prayer (Mass) and daily living.
- *People: And with your spirit* = we acknowledge the Holy Spirit's unique activity through the ordained priest (and deacon) throughout the Mass. It is as if the people say to the priest (and deacon at the Gospel), we sincerely ask you to do what you have been authorized through ordination to do for us – please, make it happen.

## **Penitential Rite**

- Throughout the Scriptures, whenever the people dared to approach the Living God they remembered to take time to prepare carefully for their holy encounter.

- In both Old and New Testaments, the practice of acknowledging one's sins as an act of repentance; that is, "to turn in a different direction", by turning to God as we truly are always in need of divine mercy.
- Like the wayward son suffering in his misery [read: disconnection from his father], we humbly repent and return home to our Heavenly Father.

### **Gloria** [*Glory to God*]

- The feel of our prayer pivots from humble repentance and need for divine mercy to joyful praise. It is our joyful response to our pleading for mercy.
- The opening words first sung by the angels over the fields of Bethlehem, announcing to the shepherds and through them to the world the good news of Christ's birth. (Luke 1:14)
- We jubilantly express our gratitude for having been rescued by Christ Jesus from our captivity to sin and death.

### **Collect** [*Opening Prayer*]

- The priest announces, "Let Us Pray".
- A brief period of silence follows, enabling everyone to call to mind the intentions that each of us brings to Mass.
- The priest is "collect-ing" the thoughts and prayers of each and every one of us, who have been "collect-ed" from our homes for this celebration of Mass and helping us to focus our worship into one prayer, enabling us to encounter the Living God.

And so concludes the *Introductory Rite*.

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## Part Two: God Speaks to Us – The Liturgy of the Word

We hear God speak to us at every Mass. Our listening to God's Word – the Bible - leads us into deeper communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. Various Scripture Readings we hear aloud relate to seasons and feasts of the Church, so that over the course of three years we hear proclaimed a large part of the Old Testament and nearly the entirety of the New Testament.

### First Reading

- Scripture selections taken from the Old Testament (except during Easter)
- Jesus is the interpretive key for all of Scripture; that is, the Old Testament prefigures Christ and His Church.
- We exclaim, "Thanks be to God", signaling our sincere thanks as intentional disciples.

### Responsorial Psalm

- We *respond* to God's Word with even more of God's Word taken from the *Book of Psalms*, a collection of 150 hymns that capture the full range of human experience and God's graciousness to us.
- The back-and-forth movement – antiphonal - is present throughout the Bible, as our worship (again) beautifully conforms to the biblical standard.

### Second Reading

- Scripture selections taken from the New Testament Epistles ("Letters"), Acts of the Apostles or the Book of Revelation.

- We hear about the saving work of Jesus for us and receive practical applications for cheerful and committed Christian living.

### **Gospel Reading**

- We *sing* this Hebrew expression meaning, “Praise the LORD”, a word found at the beginning and end of many Psalms and also is spoken by the angels in heaven to praise God for His work of salvation.
- We *stand* to welcome the Lord Jesus who is about to be proclaimed in the Gospel.
- We *trace* a three-fold Sign of the Cross, asking the LORD to consecrate our thoughts (forehead), words (lips) and actions (heart).
- The Gospel recounts for us works and actions of Jesus, to make Jesus’ life present and impactful in deeply personal ways.

### **Homily [Preaching]**

- The priest or deacon explains God’s Word, seeking to apply it for help in daily living.

### **Creed [Profession of Faith]**

- We *stand* and state the standard for Christian belief as given to us by the early Church.

### **Prayer of the Faithful [Petitions]**

- Intercessory prayers are voiced on behalf of those in special need of God’s help

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## Part Three: *God Comes to Us – The Liturgy of the Eucharist*

Having heard God first speak to us in a variety of biblical selections proclaimed throughout *The Liturgy of the Word*, the second half of the Mass now begins: ***The Liturgy of the Eucharist***.

At every Mass, Jesus' one sacrifice on the cross miraculously becomes present for everyone. The priest, who acts in the person of Christ (Latin: *alter Christus* or "another Christ") says and does what Jesus directed be done at the Last Supper in memory of Him (cf. Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). We participate in the one self-donating act of Christ's perfect love offering on the cross that has rescued us all from captivity to sin and death.

### PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

Presenting gifts of bread and wine symbolizes the giving of our lives to God. Our financial support displays fruits of our hard work also shared generously with God, inspiring our own expansion of self-giving love and helping to advance God's Kingdom through the parish.

#### **Offertory** [Presenting bread, wine & also financial support]

- Bread and wine symbolize our lives, and we *offer* them to God however we are. They are given to the priest and deacon who place them upon the altar – the place of sacrifice.

### **Ablution** [mixing of water and wine]

- At the altar, the priest or deacon adds drops of water to the wine symbolizing our humanity (water) entering into Christ's divinity (wine). Christ invites us to share His Life and this action conveys our sincere desire for this to happen with God's help.

### **Hand Washing**

- The priest washes his hands recalling Old Testament priestly washing before sacred duties were able to be performed, while quietly praying, "Wash me, O Lord from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:2).

### **Invitation to Pray**

- The people respond to the priest, expressing how *both* sacrifices – Christ's *and* their own – will be united and offered to the Father through the hands of the priest, acclaiming: *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.*

## **EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER**

The entire Eucharistic Prayer makes present Christ's saving action on the cross, enabling us to participate in its power – grace – more completely. In every Mass, Jesus permits us to associate with Him and His sacrificial love.

## **Preface Dialogue**

- The priest rallies the awareness of all to God's saving action that sets to happen in our midst upon the altar.

Priest: *The Lord be with you.*

People: *And with your spirit.*

Priest: *Lift up your hearts.*

People: *We lift them up to the Lord*

Priest: *Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.*

People: *It is right and just.*

## **Preface Prayer**

- Following the biblical blueprint for thanksgiving to God (Psalms), the priest addresses God the Father on behalf of everyone, expressing deep gratitude for His mighty works.

## **Holy, Holy, Holy**

- All join together in the hymn of praise jubilantly sung by the angels and saints (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8), while also repeating the greeting Jesus received entering Jerusalem (cf. Mt 21:9; Mk 11:9-10; Jn 12:13).
- The biblical word "Hosanna" (Hebrew) means "save us" (cf. Ps 118).

## **Epiclesis** [(Greek) "invocation upon"]

- The priest extends his hands over the gifts of bread and wine and prays that the Father send the Holy Spirit to change the offering atop the altar into Jesus' Body and Blood.

## **Words of Institution and Consecration**

- Beginning as a Passover meal, Jesus unexpectedly (as Jew) and authoritatively (as God) speaks about his own body and blood being offered up and poured out in sacrifice.
- In speaking this way, Jesus identifies Himself with the sacrificial lamb, providing the interpretation of His sacrifice on the cross – a sacrificial offering accomplished for us and for our salvation.

## **The Mystery of Faith**

- The priest voices wonder over the divine mystery unfolding atop the altar and the people respond with one of three biblically inspired expressions of God's saving action.

## **Intercessions**

- The priest voices several intercessory prayers on behalf of us all. *First*, the priest expresses prayers for all who will soon be nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ – the assembled Church. *Then*, the priest prays for the Church universal, naming the pope and (local) bishop and asking God to favor and protect the entire People of God, living and deceased.

## **Doxology (*Through Him, with Him and in Him ...*) and Great Amen**

- The Eucharistic Prayer culminates with the priest praising God in an expression that dates to the early second century.

- The people respond with the vocalization heralded in the Roman Missals as the “Great Amen”. The biblical word “Amen” (Hebrew) means “so be it.” It signifies confident assent and, in this instance, the entire assembly – the whole church – earnestly acknowledges the entire Eucharistic Prayer as true.

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### **Part Four: *The Communion Rite and Concluding Rites***

*When the priest has spoken the words of institution, Our Lord truly is present. Now we prepare to receive Jesus’ Body and Blood in Holy Communion so to be fortified to go forth from Mass to advance God’s Kingdom as members of His Church, diffusing God’s Love everywhere we go.*

## **COMMUNION RITE**

### **The Lord’s Prayer**

- The priest exhorts us to pray together the words Jesus teaches His disciples are to pray: *At the Savior’s command and formed by divine teaching we dare to say”*
- The “*Our Father*” includes seven petitions that we humbly and confidently voice to God the Father (Luke 6:9-13; Matthew 11:1-4).
- The “*Our Father*” sets the pattern of all prayer (Acts 2:42). By means of speaking these hallowed words, everything rightly desired is requested and in right order.

*TIP! Make a conscious effort to pray the Our Father with an urgency of pleading to live always and everywhere underneath God’s provident goodness as His own.*

## **Embolism & Doxology**

- The priest magnifies the final plea from *The Lord's Prayer* – “deliver us from evil” – by imploring the LORD for His gift of peace to be received by all, the manifestation of divine presence and power.
- The faithful respond with a short doxology, that recalls the heavenly liturgy: “*For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever*” (Rev 1:6; 4:11; 5:13; 19:12).

## **Sign of Peace**

- Having first petitioned God the Father for the gift of peace, the priest directly addresses Christ Jesus the Lord by recalling His tender words spoken to the disciples during the Last Supper: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27).
- The priest greets everyone with the words of the Risen Lord: “The peace of the Lord be with you always” (cf. John 20:21) and invites the exchange of peace, signifying our love for each other in Christ (if present, the deacon gives this instruction).

## **Breaking of the Bread**

- In the earliest Church, the unleavened consecrated bread was broken into pieces as a practical gesture to distribute Holy Communion. So, also, the action recalls blessed moments when Jesus broke bread and symbolizes the unity of many partaking of the same holy source.

## Comingling

- After breaking the Sacred Host at the altar, the priest places the smallest of pieces into the chalice while quietly praying, “May this mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.”

## Lamb of God [Latin: *Agnus Dei*]

- While the priest performs the breaking ritual of the Sacred Host, all pray the words known as the “Lamb of God”. These words echo the heavenly liturgy proclamation by all the angels and saints who worship the Risen Lord Jesus as the victorious Lamb who was slain (cf. Rev 5:11-12). On Sunday, these words typically are sung.

## Communion

- The priest raises the Sacred Host for all to see and recalls the startling pronouncement of John the Baptist: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).
- The assembly responds first by acknowledging our unworthiness to receive the Lord Jesus and then express our total confidence in Jesus’ call and healing power: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” (cf. Mt 8:8).
- The Holy Eucharist connects us to Christ in the most personal of ways. God permits us to experience a deep, mystical and real encounter with Him, understanding, loving and heralding us as His own. *Receiving Holy*

*Eucharist is **the** privileged divine source of comfort and healing.*

- The priest or deacon, or in the absence of an ordinary minister an Extraordinary Ministry of Holy Communion, will slightly raise the Blessed Sacrament as we approach, and state, “The Body of Christ.” We wholeheartedly respond, “Amen”.

NOTE: The act of receiving Holy Communion declares three truths:

- 1) *Belief* that Jesus Christ is truly and substantially present under the appearance of the bread we receive.
  - 2) *Assent* to all that His Body – the Church – professes and teaches is true.
  - 3) *Identifying* as a member of His Body – the Church.
- After the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest (if present, the deacon) collects and returns the remaining Sacred Hosts to the Tabernacle.
  - The priest leads the “Prayer After Communion”, praying expressly for the spiritual fruits of the Eucharist to take effect in our lives.

## **CONCLUDING RITES**

### **Final Blessing**

- Just as the Mass begins with the Sign of the Cross, everyone stands now for its ending, marking themselves again this victorious sign of our salvation the cross as the priest blesses all *in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*.

## **Sent Forth in Peace**

- All that God graciously has made present to us throughout the Mass is done to immerse us ever more deeply into the life and mission of Christ Jesus our Lord and King.

*TIP! Having encountered the Risen Lord Jesus together anew, it now is for us to radiate the love of God everywhere we go. Come, Lord Jesus!*

*The mystery of love we celebrate and receive in the Mass and which we adore in our its Eucharistic Presence in our churches must produce daily fruits and also heal the most widespread ills of our age. It must grow in all of us genuine concern to help our neighbor and to change structures and situations that gravely offend human dignity.*

*\*These notes taken from a four-part series on the Mass by Father Dave Nuss. 2025.*

