

How Catholics Worship

What We Do and Why We Do It



The Catholic faith has always embraced creation—water, air, light, darkness, the beauty of the earth; work of human hands in the bread and wine; oil and incense and the light of candles—and used them in its worship. We lift up our hands and heart to the One who has created the

very things about which we speak words of thanks and praise. As a baptized people we stand in awe as we pray, realizing, with Saint Paul, that we have access to God through the gifts of creation declared by God to be “very good.” The church over the centuries has used all these gifts of creation to help us lift up our hearts in prayer together and called it liturgy: the work of the people. Our American bishops have stated, “Liturgy is the source of the Church’s prayer and action, and the summit by which our lives and all our ministries ascend to the Father.”

Liturgy in the Roman Catholic tradition proceeds in three ways: signs and symbols perceptible to human senses which point to the divine, call and response which resonate in our being, and bodily posture and movement. It is in these moments that we consciously connect to God and respond to God’s call through ritual word and deed.

There is a danger that we do the right thing for the wrong reason. It is not liturgy if we become trapped in doing actions as religious behavior to feel good, while over-looking the mystery to which it points. Liturgy is inauthentic when it becomes unworldly and does not impel us to action. We must never be satisfied with externals, but rather allow them to lead us in our search for God found always and everywhere, who is the source of all our prayer and our longing.

The relationship between liturgy and the life all around us is the profound and incarnate expression of our faith. Liturgy is not where we go to avoid the world, retreat from the mundane, or recoil from life. Liturgy is where we bring our shattered dreams of crushed lives, our lamentations of loss, our sorrows, and the pain of a broken world. We also bring our joys and hopes knowing that through the celebration of the Paschal Mystery all is transformed.

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www.fdlc.org; publications@fdlc.org; phone: 202-635-6990; fax: 202-529-2452

Author: Dr. Peter J. Zografos | Artwork: Jane Pitz