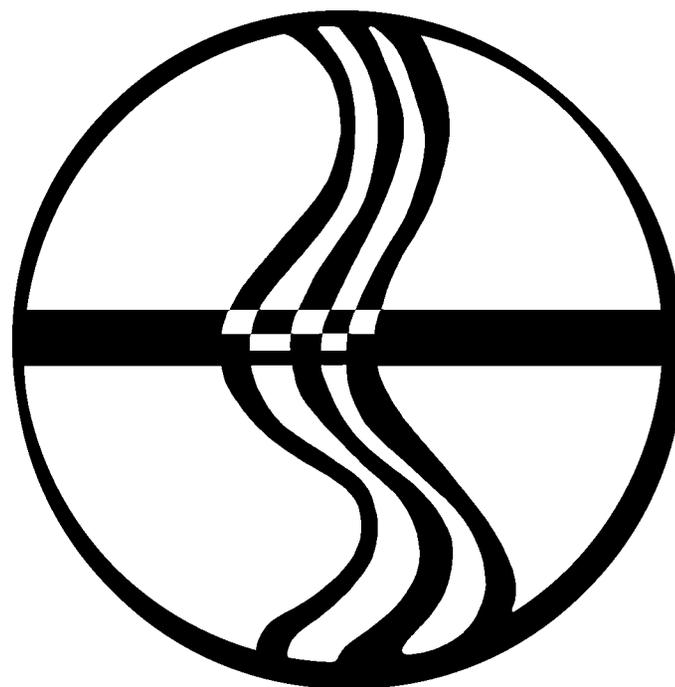


# The Mystery We Celebrate



## Part I

### *Deepening our Appreciation of the Mass*

#### **The Roman Missal**

When the bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) passed *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December, 1963), they set in motion a massive project to reform and renew the liturgical life of the Catholic Church. The commission set up by Pope Paul VI to implement the council's mandates faced a daunting task of creating new liturgical books for the Mass, the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours and the other liturgical rites.

One of the most important results of their labors was the new Missal, issued in 1970. The Latin text was then translated into the various vernacular languages—with the approved English version appearing in 1974. The Missal includes all the texts needed for celebrating Mass. A second edition of the Missal was issued in Latin in 1975, which added a number of new texts for Masses and some other minor changes. This edition is the source of the English Sacramentary that we formerly used for Mass. The third edition of the Latin Missal appeared in March 2002, the English translation of which will be used in the USA from the First Sunday of Advent, 2011, onwards.

The introduction to the Missal is called the *General Instruction*. It first appeared before the Missal itself, in 1969, as an introduction to the revised Order of the Mass, describing the way the Mass was to be celebrated according to the reforms of the Vatican II. Some additional material was added to it before the publication of the Missal in 1970. The General Instruction of the third edition of the Roman Missal was released in preliminary form in 2000 and in a final version with the publication of the Latin edition of the Missal in 2002. A preliminary English translation, issued by the United States bishops in 2003 as an aid to catechesis, was superseded in 2011 with the publication of the English *Roman Missal*, 3rd. edition.

#### **What is a General Instruction?**

The term General Instruction is a bit misleading in English, because the document is more than an instruction. As an expression of liturgical law, it gives directions for the proper celebration of the Mass. But it also contains a wealth of material that is useful for deepening our understanding of the Mass and its various parts. The *General*

*Instruction* describes and explains the various parts of the Mass, and the roles of the various ministers. At the same time it presents us with a profound description of the theological meaning of the ritual actions in which we engage.

Before the revised *General Instruction* went into effect, a number of decisions needed to be made by national bishops conferences. The bishops of each country, for example, decide the form of the Sign of Peace, whether communion will be received standing or kneeling, and what materials may be used for sacred furnishings and vestments. These local adaptations are included in the translations of the *General Instruction* once the bishops' decisions are confirmed by the Vatican.

The publication of the third edition of the *Roman Missal* at the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity does not call for major changes in the way Catholics celebrate the Eucharist. It does, however, offer an ideal time for all of us to deepen our understanding of this central sacrament of our faith.

This series of bulletin inserts will reflect on the ways in which our participation in the ritual actions of the worshipping community brings us to encounter the Lord and joins us to his saving work.

## Ritual Action

Our liturgical celebrations are composed of ritual behaviors; they involve repeated patterns of words and actions that become traditional and comfortable. These ritual patterns are formed of various elements in worship: singing and silence, readings and preaching, prayers and processions, ritual gestures and varying postures, symbols and actions. The structure of the patterns enables all those who gather for the liturgy to enter into one common act of worship. We can sing and pray and move and act together because we know the pattern.

Another value of such ritual is that it frees us from worrying about what is going to happen next, thus enabling us to enter more deeply into the meaning of our worship rather than concentrating on the mechanics.

After we have celebrated the liturgy a few times, we grow comfortable with our responses and with the flow of the celebration. We know, almost without thinking about it, what we are to do and say at each part of the liturgy.

When we do stop to think about it, however, we may find it difficult to describe the flow of the liturgy to someone else. Take a minute for a little self-test: Try to write a simple outline of the Mass, listing each element of our worship in the order in which we celebrate it. You may well find that you quickly become confused and are unable to create an accurate outline. When we actually celebrate the liturgy, we take our cues from the words and actions of others around us (including the presider and other special ministers who lead our worship), and so we remember each step as it arrives. Without those cues, we might well find ourselves at a loss to know what the next part of the Mass is.

## The Structure of the Mass

It can be helpful for us to take a look at how the Mass is put together. Understanding the purpose of the different parts of the liturgy can help us enter more fully into the act of worship and thus derive more spiritual benefit from the liturgy. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal gives us a description of the structure and elements of the Mass.

“The Mass consists in some sense of two parts, namely the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, these being so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass is spread the table both of God’s Word and of the Body of Christ, and from it the faithful are to be instructed and refreshed. There are also certain rites that open and conclude the celebration.” (# 28)

These two principal parts (Word and Eucharist) and two surrounding parts (entrance and dismissal) are an example of the basic structure of almost any human celebration. Whenever we celebrate any occasion, we gather together, we share words and stories, we share food and drink and then we take leave of one another. The Mass follows that basic human pattern.

In the next two articles, we will look at these four parts of the Mass in more detail. Understanding how things fit together may give us a new appreciation for this liturgy, ever ancient and ever new.

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### *The Mystery We Celebrate Part 1 of 8*

Author: Lawrence E. Mick; Artwork: Jane Pitz

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web site: [www.fdlc.org](http://www.fdlc.org); email: [publications@aol.org](mailto:publications@aol.org); voice: 202.635.6990.

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