

Give Thanks and Praise

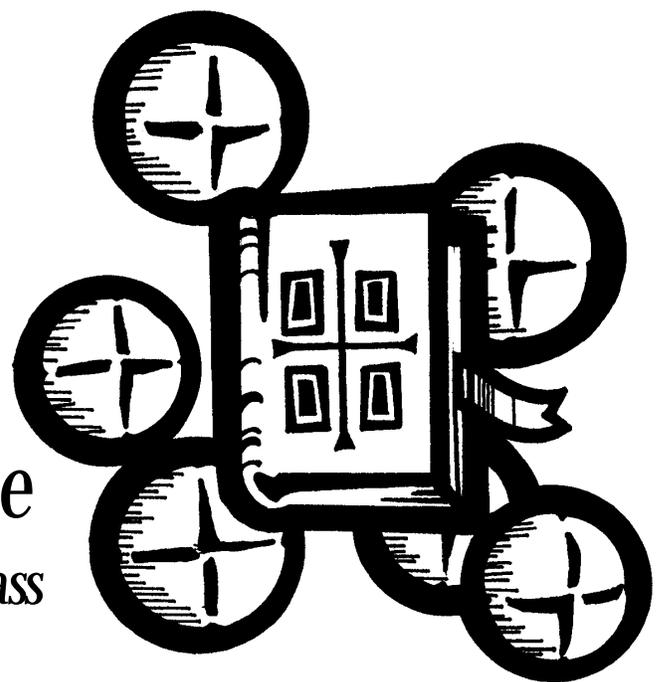
A Popular Explanation of the Mass

Part 1 Introduction

Sunday after Sunday, year after year, Catholics have come together to celebrate the Mass. This weekly gathering of the community is a hallmark of the Church. From the earliest days of Christianity coming together on the Lord's Day has characterized the followers of Christ. We assemble for common prayer, to hear the scriptures proclaimed and explained, and to share in the eucharist. This tradition of marking the Lord's Day with common prayer is an essential part of our lives as a community of God's people.

The Development of a Tradition

Having its origins in the meal celebrated by Jesus with his apostles at the Last Supper, the Christian Sunday celebration soon incorporated various ritual elements from Jewish and other cultural practices. Throughout the centuries the development of the Mass has varied according to diverse places and religious mentalities. While preserving a fundamental outline, this history followed many and often divergent paths. There were borrowings by local churches from other local churches. There were many additions to the ritual, some of which lasted for centuries while others were soon abandoned. There existed many popular understandings of the Mass which in turn influenced or were influenced by the manner in which the Mass was celebrated.



The Reform of a Tradition

Not all the historical developments of the Mass were happy ones. This is why the bishops at the Second Vatican Council called for a reform of the Mass that would bring out more clearly the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, the connection between them, and would more readily achieve the devout, active participation of the faithful. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 50)

This reform of the structure of the Mass has already been accomplished. The Church has provided us with a basic pattern for our Sunday worship. According to all reports the vast majority of Catholics are happy with the changes that have taken place. People are beginning to feel that the Mass is indeed their Mass, that they are called upon and have an opportunity to participate actively in its celebration.

A Challenge for the Future

Even though we have made considerable liturgical progress over the last two decades, our American bishops in 1983 issued a word of warning. We must not yield to complacency.

There have been many significant liturgical gains in the past twenty years, but there remain many areas of unfinished liturgical business ... we must continue to make efforts to appreciate and open our hearts to the spiritual and prayerful dimensions of the liturgy. (*The Church at Prayer: A Holy Temple of the Lord*, no. 46)

The purpose of this series is to help us respond to our bishops' request that we continue to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the liturgy. We will explore what we are about when we gather for the celebration of Mass. How is the Mass put together? Why do we do the things we do? Why do we do them at the time we do them? How can we pray more deeply with others? These are some of the questions we shall address in this series.

Major Sections of the Mass

As Catholics we commonly refer to our Sunday gathering as the "Mass," a word deriving from the Latin "missa," a technical word for "dismissal," i.e., the breaking up of a meeting, the conclusion of an official assembly. From the fourth century the term was applied to the whole celebration.

Many of us remember the days when people spoke of the Mass as having three major parts, i.e., the "offertory, consecration and communion." If you missed one of these, you failed to fulfill your Sunday obligation. Today, however, we speak of the *Liturgy of the Word* and the *Liturgy of the Eucharist* as being the two key sections of the celebration. One might assume that these are two completely distinct and separate parts of the Mass.

Not so! Very early in the Christian experience the celebration of word and meal were seen as inseparable as wife and husband. One goes with the other. Both are liturgy. Each is of equal importance. Listening to God speak to us through the scripture readings is just as important as sharing at the table of the Lord. The conversation before the meal is as essential as the meal itself. Speech and meal, Word and eucharist. One liturgy. One prayer of the Church.

We speak of the *Liturgy of the Word* and the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*. Of Greek origin, the term "liturgy" describes any official public act of worship celebrated by the Church. The word thus refers not to individual prayer but to the prayer offered by the community according to the established norms of the Church. Every Mass is a liturgy, but not every liturgy is a Mass. Celebrations of baptism and marriage are also liturgies.

Every liturgy includes *ritual*, i.e., a traditional and commonly accepted way of doing things. These standard patterns of worship are described in liturgical books such as the Roman Missal which contains the prayers of the Mass and the Lectionary for Mass where the scripture readings and psalm responses are found.

We must remember that the ritual of the Mass is not composed of various individual elements following one another like boxcars in a freight train. There are major and minor moments of the celebration just as there are more intense and more relaxed moments of life in general. There are times of preparation and of conclusion. There are times for attentive listening, for vigorous dialogue, for enthusiastic singing, for reverent gestures and postures, for prayerful silence.

While all these elements coalesce to form a unified whole, there exists an ebb and flow which can be called the "rhythm" of the celebration. And once we enter into the celebration, we become part of this rhythm. We share in and contribute to the community's multi-dimensional experience of prayer together.

Our Task Ahead

The following nine issues of this series will reflect on:

The **Introductory Rites** which help us to become a community one in mind and heart, which help us to be Church, conscious that we are the body of that person from whom we take our name (no. 2).

The **Liturgy of the Word** from the perspective of the God who speaks to us of love, of the utter goodness of creation, of marvelous life yet to come (no. 3); from the perspective of the lectionary which unfolds the mystery of God's love according to a pattern of feasts and seasons (no. 4); from our role as listeners who minister to others by our careful attention and who can better receive the word by advance preparation (no. 5).

The **Liturgy of the Eucharist** as our response to God bringing about transformation not only in bread and wine, but in us as well (no. 6); the preparation of the altar and gifts helping us dispose ourselves to share in the table of the Lord (no. 7); the eucharistic prayer as the high point of the eucharistic liturgy (no. 8); the communion rite in which our signs of unity are expressed in the sharing of Christ's body and blood (no. 9).

The **Concluding Rite** which sends us forth to continue to praise God and to do the good works of the Kingdom.