

Understanding *the* Mass



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Living a Eucharistic Life

This little booklet has been produced to help you grow in understanding and appreciation of our eucharistic ritual so that you may participate more “fully, consciously, and actively” as Vatican II instructed. The eucharist (Greek for *thanksgiving*) or Mass has always been, and still is, the central worship experience that defines us as Christians and directs our efforts to realize God’s kingdom community today. In it, we celebrate Christ’s presence within us as individuals and among us as his beloved community. He offers us his body and blood so that we might live anew in greater communion with God and one another.

The pattern of the Eucharistic Prayer—take, bless, break and share—is also the fundamental pattern of our whole life. Like Jesus, who gives himself to become our bread, we are called upon to give ourselves so that everyone might live more fully in relation to God and to one another. Thus we can never be content just to “go to Mass.” Rather, by our “full, conscious and active participation” in the mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection which the Mass remembers and makes present, we celebrate how we have been gifted and how our lives too are an expression of thanksgiving.



Communion with Christ

The sacrament of the eucharist is one of the three sacraments of initiation. As such, it celebrates the fullness of our initiation into communion with the body of Christ both in the Eucharistic ritual and in the Christian community. Being in communion with Christ is the desire and the ongoing reality that distinguishes us as Christians for we believe that Jesus is alive and in the sacrament of the eucharist he is present with us in the priest who presides, in

the assembled community who gather, in the Word that is proclaimed, in the consecrated bread and wine that we receive and in all the other people to whom we are sent on mission.

Each form of Christ's presence leads to a distinctive type of communion or relationship with Christ. Christ's presence in the assembly invites



us into communion in the community of God's people. Christ's presence in the Word proclaimed invites us into communion through communication.

Christ's presence in the blessed bread and wine invites us into communion with his body and blood as our spiritual food and drink. And Christ's presence in others invites us into communion in the communal mission that carries on the saving work of Jesus to the waiting world.

An Overview of Our Eucharistic Celebration

Vatican Council II emphasized that the Mass was not to be something that just the priest did, but something that the whole community or assembly did together—singing, praying, listening to God's

Word, praying for the needs of the Church and world, thanking God, sharing the consecrated bread and wine, and finally being sent back to their homes, schools and workplaces to live what they celebrated: God present with us to change our lives and gather us into God's own community of justice, love and peace.

The Parts of the Mass

The Church's guidelines for the celebration of Mass, found in the *General Instruction for the Roman Missal* (2002), remind us that "The Mass is made up, as it were, of two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These, however, are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass the table both of God's word and of Christ's Body is prepared, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed. There are also certain rites that open and conclude the celebration" (#28).

The Introductory Rites: Gathering as Christ's Body

Long before people enter the church, the Gathering Rite begins as people prepare to come to church and celebrate the eucharist. The gathering

assembly—women, men, children and adults, rich and poor, young and old, black, white, Hispanic, and Asian—exemplify the unity and diversity of the Body of Christ.

The word *liturgy* means “the people’s work.” The Gathering Rite involves several actions which remind us of our membership in the community and focus attention on our common task of worship.

The entrance procession of the ministers and the gathering song of the assembly begin our liturgy. The Gathering Song unifies all who are gathered and sets the tone for today’s celebration. Think how the song “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” expresses our Advent waiting and “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” conveys our Easter joy.



The greeting by the presiding priest begins with the Sign of the Cross that marks us as a baptized people. Then the presider offers a few words to help us focus our attention on an important theme or feeling highlighted in today’s liturgy.

The Penitential Rite reminds us that we have

come into this holy place to perform a sacred action. We are aware of how unworthy we are to meet Christ here today because of our sinfulness. Knowing our sins, we call on Christ as our powerful savior. Through his life, death and resurrection which we are celebrating, he has conquered sin and death. As his followers, we are forgiven and through him and with him we draw near to God in our act of worship. Knowing that we are forgiven, we burst into the ancient church's mighty song of praise for the triune God—"Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all people on earth!"

Having been united in our gathering through forgiveness and praise of God, we now formalize this unity through our community prayer. This Opening Prayer, spoken by the presiding priest in the name of the whole community, expresses our understanding of God and pours out the needs of our pilgrim Church with images deeply rooted in scripture. This prayer ends the Gathering Rite and prepares us for the next action in which we listen and respond to God's Word.



The Liturgy of the Word: Listening for God's Message

Words are powerful. They make us move, laugh, cry, love and hate. They can build up relationships or tear them down. God's Word is also powerful, for it can change our lives. When God speaks, things happen!

In the Liturgy of the Word, we listen to God through readings selected from the Bible and collected in a book called the *Lectionary*. We discover how God was present to people of faith in the past and continues to be active in our lives today. "The Word of the Lord!" is really a proclamation; the response, "Thanks be to God!" is an acclamation said with reverence, awe, and wholehearted acceptance.

The Liturgy of the Word consists of several parts: the First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm, the Second Reading, the Gospel and the Homily. The readings are arranged in a three year cycle, so we hear the same readings again every fourth year.

The First Reading, Responsorial Psalm & Second Reading

On Sundays and major feasts there are always three readings. The First Reading is usually from the Old Testament, or from the Acts of the Apostles

during Easter season. It is selected to relate directly to the themes of the Gospel reading.

After a period of silence, the Responsorial Psalm is sung by the cantor or choir. The psalm is an extension of the first reading and invites us to reflect further upon God's saving deeds.

The Second Reading is chosen from the New Testament writings of Paul, Peter, James and John who witness to their early Church communities' living out their Christian commitment.

Hearing the Gospel's Good News

The high point of the Liturgy of the Word is the proclamation of the Gospel. We stand to show respect for God's special presence in the words of the Gospel. We welcome the Lord who is about to speak to us by singing either the Gospel Acclamation or the Alleluia, the Hebrew word meaning "Praise Yahweh." Before indicating what the Gospel reading is, the reader reminds us of God's presence by greeting us "The Lord be with you."



The word *gospel* means "good news." The early Christians described their message about God

acting in and through Jesus of Nazareth as their gospel. The written accounts of this message in the form of the life and ministry of Jesus by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are now simply referred to as the Gospels. Since the Gospels record Jesus' words and actions, they continue to call us to faith and conversion. After hearing the Word of God, the Homily helps us discover how God is still active today in our lives.

Profession of Faith & Prayer of the Faithful

The Profession of Faith or Creed (from the Latin word *Credo*, "I believe") summarizes the fundamental beliefs that unite us as a Christian community. It was formulated by the first ecumenical council held at Nicaea in AD 325 (so we call it the *Nicene Creed*, even though some parts were added and refined by later councils).

The Prayers of the Faithful or general intercessions, remind us that our liturgy is never individualistic or self-centered. We reach out through these prayers to remember the needs of the church, government leaders, those oppressed in various ways, our parish community and the salvation of the whole world.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist: Joined with Christ at the Table

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the Preparation of the Gifts, known prior to Vatican II as the Offertory. After professing our beliefs and gathering our prayers, representatives from the assembly bring forward our humble gifts of bread and wine and our monetary gifts for the poor. The presider receives these gifts and offers a prayer of thanksgiving. Then the presider invites us to join with him in praying first over our gifts and then in the Eucharistic Prayer which immediately follows. Our response shows we are eager and willing to do this.

The Eucharistic Prayer

Our Eucharistic Prayer is the central action of our eucharistic celebration. At its deepest core it is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for God's mighty deeds of salvation. It also makes present for us the body and blood of the Lord and his saving actions.



This prayer not only transforms the bread and wine into our eucharist, but it also transforms us, the assembly, into a visible sign of Christ in our world.

Our Eucharistic Prayer is spoken by the presider who addresses God in the name of Christ. But we in the assembly join with the presider both through our silent reverence and our three bold acclamations: first the “Holy, Holy, Holy,” then the memorial acclamation after the consecration of the bread and wine, and finally the great “Amen” which concludes this prayer.

The dynamic pattern of our Eucharistic Prayer consists of praise and thanksgiving, memorial and offering, intercession and praise. After the community’s prayer of praise, the presider calls down the power of the Holy Spirit upon our gifts to consecrate them, that is, to make them holy.

At the center of our Eucharistic Prayer is the institution narrative which retells what happened



at Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples on the night before he died. We remember Jesus’ words and gestures at this meal when he left his final gift of himself as the food to

be shared. God’s intention to be united with us is fulfilled in an unexpected and surprising way. The mystery of our faith is revealed and re-presented so

we can connect with the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Remembering God's transforming and saving action makes it powerfully present again for us now. Our remembering prompts us to offer this life-giving bread and cup along with ourselves to God. As we offer ourselves, we are reminded that we never pray our Eucharistic Prayer alone. So we recall and ask God to remember the whole Church in heaven and on earth, and all the faithful both living and dead.

This leads to our final statement of thanks and praise which not only sums up our Eucharistic Prayer but also reminds us of the trinitarian reality which grounds our lives.

As the presider lifts high the bread and cup in a sign of offering, we assent to all that has happened in this Eucharistic Prayer by our thunderous "Amen."



The Communion Rite

After the Eucharistic Prayer, we prepare to receive the body and blood of Christ in the Communion Rite. We are invited to show the unity and peace which come from our participation in this sacred meal.

First we join in praying the Lord's Prayer, which summarizes what we ought to be doing in our covenant relation to God and what we can expect God to be doing in relation to us. Then we demonstrate the unity, love and forgiveness demanded by the Lord's Prayer by exchanging a sign of peace. Peace, as in the Hebrew word *shalom*, extends to others the wish for complete health, fulfillment and prosperity.

As the bread is broken so that we can share it, and a piece of bread is mingled with the wine to



recall Christ's resurrection to new life, we sing the "Lamb of God" litany, always ending with the petition for God to "grant us peace." Then we receive

the body and blood of Christ. After a few moments of silent prayer, the presider petitions God to pour the effects of our eucharist into our lives.

The Concluding Rite: Sent by Christ to the World

The Concluding Rite reminds us of our common Christian vocation to go back into the world to continue the mission and ministry that

Jesus began and commissioned us to do too. The Concluding Rite is composed of the dialogue of dismissal by the priest and ourselves. He sends us back into our daily lives to live according to Jesus'



example. As Pope Francis reminds us, “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples...an evangelizing community that gets

involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, #24). Just as we are gathered by God’s invitation, so we are sent out by the power of the Holy Spirit into the world again to share the good news of salvation with our households, our friends and relatives, those in our schools and workplaces, our neighborhoods and communities. What we have celebrated ritually in the eucharist, we must now live in the ordinary time of our lives.

“The Mass is the loving encounter
with God through his Word
and the Body and Blood of Jesus.
It is the memorial of Christ’s Passover.
It makes us participants
in his victory over sin and death,
and gives full meaning to our life.
Taking part in the Mass,
particularly on Sunday,
means entering the victory
of the Risen One,
being illuminated by his light,
warmed by his compassion.
Through the Eucharistic celebration,
the Holy Spirit makes us
participants in the divine life
that is able to transfigure
our whole mortal being.”

—*Pope Francis*

