

Teaching the Mass – A Lenten Spiritual Journey Through The Mass

Before Mass & Preparation

During this walk-through of the Mass, it may strike you how closely tied are the Mass and the Bible – how thoroughly the Mass is based in the Bible. In fact, this isn't really the historically accurate way to describe the relationship between the Mass and the Bible. One did not produce the other. Rather, they developed side by side in history. The New Testament and the Mass were both given to us by Jesus Christ and his disciples through the instrument of the Catholic Church. As surely as the New Testament, evangelists were preaching the word of God. They eventually wrote their words down on paper and were also celebrating the Eucharist in their Christian communities. Over the next three hundred years of the formation of the Bible, it was not Sola Scripture – “Scripture Alone” – as the sole source of authority for the Christian Community. No, it was the Church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a living, breathing Body of Christ, putting together the books of the Holy Scripture, what was eventually called the “Bible” (the books), even while it was celebrating the Breaking of the Bread and leading the Christian Community.

Let's dive right into the Mass and see its scriptural, early church origins, and discover the rich theology meaning and purpose behind every prayer, gesture, posture, blessing, and symbol in the Mass. Let's start first, though, with our own preparations and the stuff that we should know and do before Mass ever begins.

1. **Sign of the Cross** – What is the first thing that Catholics do as they enter into church? Dip their right hand into the water and make the sign of the cross. “Holy water” is our baptismal water. After a baby is baptized in the font the blessed water is placed in smaller fonts – set at the entrance to every Catholic Church. Christ commanded his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and to do that with water and the Holy Spirit. The Apostles began the tradition of marking the newly baptized with the Sign of the Cross. It was a seal of the Lord's salvation, given to them at their baptism. In Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, he reminds us that the first installment of our salvation was given to us at our baptism, when we were sealed with the Holy Spirit. The Bible's last book reveals that those marked with "the seal of God on their foreheads" are spared from destruction (see Revelation 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4).

2. **Genuflection or Bow** - For the ancients, it was a custom to go down on one knee (to genuflect) before a king or person of high rank. They got this from their faith tradition. As Christians, when we enter the pew we genuflect before the presence of Christ in the tabernacle. We kneel before God in worship and prayer. This is what the psalmist expressed in Psalm 95:6: “Enter, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD who made us..”
3. **Personal Prayer Time & Preparation** – For centuries we have had the tradition of preparing our hearts and minds 10 to 15 minutes prior to the start of Mass in order to fully enter into this time of worship. How can one fully appreciate and experience any significant any without proper preparation. We mustn’t rush into the Mass, one or two minutes before or after it begins. Does a businessman or woman rush into his or her presentation before clients, colleagues or boss and hope to accomplish the goals of the presentation? We need to give our hearts and minds time to prepare for an authentic encounter with the most significant Being in this universe.
4. **Lighting Candles** – In Matthew 5:14, Jesus tells us “you are the light of the Lord” and we are to shine our light in the world. The light we are to shine to all the world is Jesus himself. From our earliest beginnings, Catholics have used candles to remind them of Christ as the Light of the world, and the saints as little lights who have shone the way to Christ. For us, candles extend our prayers to Christ. That is why we call them vigil candles or votive candles. Vigil, from the Latin, means waiting or watching. We offer up our prayer before Jesus, or one of his saints (who pray for us), and the light symbolizes our waiting and watching in prayer, a flame rising up to God. The candle nearest the tabernacle is vigil candle, it stands a symbol of watching, indicating the Eucharistic Presence of our Lord. It also indicates our desire for Christ’s second coming, as we wait for the completion of time when all things will be one in God. Votive means desire or will. A votive candle expresses and extends the intention of the person praying. Even though we cannot pray 24 hours a day for our intention, we trust that our little prayer light will shine before God and offer up our prayer. These candles are not “magic.” They have no power in and of themselves. Rather, they communicate what is in our hearts and minds in a tangible and extended form.
 - a. **Eucharistic Chapel** - When we enter into our Eucharistic chapel to offer a prayer, please remember that you are passing by the Presence of Jesus in the tabernacle. Therefore, before you come up here to light a candle, please genuflect to the

Eucharistic Presence as you walk up the steps. After you have lit your candle and walked down the steps, genuflect once more before Christ.

5. **Standing & Singing at the Beginning of the Mass** - When the Mass begins everyone stands up. You are not standing up because “the priest has entered the building.” No. Standing is the traditional posture of the Christian at prayer: It expresses our attentiveness to the word of God and our readiness to carry it out. We are up on our feet and ready to get into the moment of prayer and worship, ready for the growth of spiritual knowledge that comes from the Word of God and to participate in Christ’s redemptive work in our lives. Singing – everyone should be singing. If you can’t sing TO God here in this church during the different parts of the Mass, how can you ever sing OF God to the world?!!! Everyone should be singing. This is not a worship service where you don’t participate, this a worship service that demands your full participation!
6. **Vestments** – when you see the priest (deacon) walking up the aisle, you notice he is not wearing normal every day street clothes. He is wearing vestments. The use of vestments goes back to the Old Testament (Exodus 28), where God instructed Moses to provide Aaron and his sons (the priests) with splendid vestments. Vestments for Mass and other sacraments continued in the Catholic Church.
 - a. **Alb** – the alb is the first layer. Alb simply means “white.” In the Book of Revelation 14:9-17, we hear about a great multitude in heaven who wear white robes. The robes were made white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb. These men and women are the holy ones who were victorious over sin and made it into heaven. At baptism, we are washed clean of the stain of original sin by the blood of the Lamb. At that time we were also given a calling, a vocation from God. The priest and deacon wear these white albs to remind them that it is Jesus who saves them (not themselves) and that they were given a calling to serve God at the altar as his ministers.
 - b. **Stole** – In Matthew 11:29-30, Jesus says “Take on my yoke and learn from me.” A yoke was placed upon the shoulders of oxen by a farmer, so the oxen can do the work of plowing the field – which would then allow the farmer to sow the field and bear much fruit. The stole is a piece of cloth worn like a yoke – so the priest can learn from God and God can guide him to do his work. The stole also came to symbolize authority. If God told his disciples to do his work (Matthew 18:18), then he gave

them the authority to do this work. We see this in the rise of the universities. When you go to a college graduation, you see them where stoles around their necks, only backwards. This academic “stole” showed that the graduate had the authority to practice medicine, law, accounting, business, etc. The Catholic Church created the university systems and the academic degrees, including the dress of graduates.

- c. **Chasuble** – Chasuble comes from the same word that produces “casa” – which means house. So the priest wears a “house” on his shoulders, the house of God. We call our priests “fathers,” because they are spiritual fathers of the household of God. They have the responsibility of being the spiritual fathers of the sons and daughters of God.

i. **Different Colors** – represent the different seasons and celebrations of the church’s year.

1. **Green** = growth and life = Ordinary Time
2. **Purple (with blue or violet)** = more severe, deeper, serious color = Advent & Lent. During Advent we wait for the birth of Christ. During Lent we go through difficult disciplines as we prepare for Christ’s death and resurrection. Both are more severe and serious seasons before great celebrations of joy and life. Before we get to victory, there is work to be done & we must be patient.
3. **Rose** = joy. During only two Sundays of the year, one in the middle of Advent and one in the middle of Lent, our Church reminds us to hold onto joy, even as we wait and discipline ourselves. If I gave you a rose, how would you feel? Happy. As we reach the half-way mark toward the Incarnation and the Resurrection, the church tells us to rejoice, we are almost there!
4. **White (and Gold)** = victory, purity, ever-lasting life. During the Christmas and Easter season we celebrate the victory that Christ gives to us through his birth and resurrection.
5. **Red** = blood of Christ & martyrs = Passion Sunday & Good Friday. Feast of the martyrs, the Christians who gave up their lives because of their belief in Christ. Red also is a symbol of the Holy

Spirit who fell upon the disciples like “tongues of fire” (red = fire). We wear red during the feast of Pentecost.

6. Whatever the priest wears the sanctuary wears.

Introductory Rites & The Liturgy Of the Word

Here we will look at the sanctuary and altar, the introductory rites and the liturgy of the word.

1. **Walking Into the Sanctuary** – After processing from the back of the church and bowing at the foot of the altar, the priest climbs the steps into the sanctuary. How many steps are there? Three. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sanctuary comes from the Latin word “sanctus,” which means “holy”. The sanctuary is the place of the holy - the Holy One God. Therefore, the priest, through architectural design, is leaving earth and entering into Heaven, the dwelling place of God. We can rightly say that the sanctuary is the closest to heaven on earth we will get on this side of life, because it is the place that Christ becomes present in the Eucharist. In the sanctuary is certain pieces of “furniture” we use in our worship of God.
 - a. **The Pulpit** – where the Word of God is proclaimed from the Scriptures.. It is usually in an elevated position, because the Word of God should be proclaimed above all other words.
 - b. **The Tabernacle** – Hebrews 9 & 10. Tabernacle = “tent” = dwelling place of God. First God dwelt among his people in the ark of the covenant in a tent, then in the temple of Jerusalem, then in Jesus Christ himself, and now Jesus dwells among us in the Eucharist- his glorified body and soul. Like in the Old Testament & New Testament times, Jesus abides in the tabernacle, in his Eucharistic presence, waiting for us to come and offer him our worship, our hearts, minds, bodies and souls.
 - c. **Presider’s Chair** – where God’s ordained priest leads the assembly of believers.
 - d. **The Altar** – where the Body and Blood of Christ is made present.
2. **Kissing of the Altar** – The priest next kisses the altar. In Old Testament times, lambs and other animals were sacrificed on altars for the forgiveness of people’s sins. The altar is a symbol of the cross, where the Lamb of God is sacrificed, once and for all, for our sins. Therefore, the priest kisses the altar as a gesture of devotion and veneration to Christ who died for our sins. This kiss is also a sign of appreciation for the instrument of our salvation – the cross. Furthermore, the priest is honoring all the saints and martyrs who gave their lives in sacrifice and service to Christ and his church.
 - a. **Relics** – Beneath the altar are the relics of the following saints:

- i. **St. John Neumann** – patron saint of our parish and the first male American saint.
 - ii. **St Therese of Lisieux** – declared a doctor of the Church for her teachings and writings on prayer.
 - iii. **St. Maria Goretti** – a virgin and martyr, she is the patron saint of the youth.
- b. The practice of placing an altar over the remains of saints dates back to the very first century of the Christian Church. The Apostles themselves write about how Christ gave them the power to help others in his name (see Acts 3:6 and Acts 19:11-12). Martyrs, like the apostles, gave their lives because of their faith. These were the heroes of the Christian Faith. The Christians often built monuments over the tombs of their fallen heroes, much like we still do today in our secular society – like the Lincoln or Washington monument. Only for the Christians, these monuments also served a spiritual purpose. They would build altars over the graves of their spiritual founding fathers, and celebrated the Breaking of the Bread at the tombs. With the lives of these holy ones as examples, they remembered the power of the resurrection over death and gained hope and courage, both during times of great persecution and calm. Recognizing that a person is body, mind and soul, as St. Paul taught, staying close to the body of a saint helped Christians to stay close to their souls, and thereby, close to the one who raised them and the one who they pray will raise them, God Almighty. Therefore, to this day, relics, or small remains of the body of saints, continue to be placed in every altar consecrated to the service of entering into Christ’s death and resurrection.
3. **Greeting** – The priest goes to his chair, where he presides over the liturgy. Liturgy means “work of the people. This entire liturgy is our work (participation) in the act of our salvation in Christ. This is a participant “work,” not a spectator sport or show. The priest declares: "The Lord be with you" (see 2 Timothy 4:22). In Scripture these words are a pledge of divine presence, protection and help (see Exodus 3:12; Luke 1:28). The priest might opt to use a different greeting, such as "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you," but this greeting too is drawn from Scripture (see 2 Corinthians 13:13).
 4. **Introduction** – a segue into the Penitential Rite, introduction of the readings or the season.
 5. **Penitential Rite** –In the “Kyrie Eleison” (a Greek phrase taken from

Scriptures – meaning – “Lord Have Mercy”), we cry out together, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” In doing this, we repeat the words of the blind beggar calling out to Jesus in Luke 18:35-43. *Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!* The people tried to quiet him, but he kept calling out all the more, *Son of Dave, have pity on me.* Jesus asked him what he wants. He wants to see. Jesus restores his sight and tells him his faith has healed him. We want to see, too. We want to see Jesus who is coming to us in the Eucharist, so we cry out, “Have pity on us...Lord have mercy on us.” In forgiving our sins, Christ removes the darkness that blinds our eyes.

- d. We also express our penitence to God and to each other, by praying together “I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters that I have sinned...” Here we are recalling the two great commandments that Jesus gave to us in Mt 22:37-39). *Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*
 - e. Sprinkling of Holy Water – which is a reminder of the power of our baptism, where Christ took away our sins and gave us the hope of eternal life. This too is scriptural. Just think of the parting of the Red Sea as liberation, the waters of the Jordan where Christ was baptized and began his ministry, and the blood and water that flowed from the side of Christ to wash away our sins.
6. **The Gloria** –*Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.* (Luke 2:14). The Gloria is meant to externally express what our hearts are experiencing at this point in the Mass. We wish to glorify God because of what he has done for us – forgiven us our sins. During the season of Advent and Lent we omit the Gloria, as a way to anticipate the birth of our savior and to do penance for our part in his death. We don’t sing the Gloria again until he is born and until he has risen, for it is then that we can truly give praise!
7. **Opening Prayer** - The Opening Prayer prepares our minds, hearts, and souls to listen to the Bible readings so that we may receive them like *seeds that have fallen on fertile ground* that will bear great fruit (see Luke 8:8). The pause at the beginning of the opening prayer is for you...for you to gather your own prayers and petitions and join them to the opening prayer of the church.

The Liturgy of the Word

Over the course of a three-year cycle, a good deal of the entire Bible is read and all the central themes of our Christian faith are covered. So, when any one asks you if you have read the Bible, just do the math. If you are 30 years old, you have heard the Bible 10 times over! If you are 60 years old, then you have heard the Bible 20 times in your life. We don't memorize verses as Catholic Christians. Which is more important? To be able to quote scriptural verses, or to know the truths being taught in the Bible? Anyone can quote Scripture. Even Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus, while he was hungry in the desert. Throughout the lifetime of a Catholic, we become intimately familiar with the entire Bible, with the stories of our faith and truths God is trying to teach us. However, hearing the Bible at Mass shouldn't be the only time we study it. Our parish has small group and large group bible studies every year, some meet at the church and some meet in homes. With good scholarship being offered in biblical studies, there is no reason why we shouldn't be studying the Scriptures and growing in our faith. At every Sunday Mass...

1. **Old Testament Reading** – We read from the Jewish Scriptures – our OT – because everything that happened among the Jewish people were events and teachings leading up to the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to *fulfill*” (Mt 5:17-19)
2. **The Psalms** – We sing the psalms, because that is how they were composed by the Jews. They were written to be sung or chanted and they beautifully express just about every human emotion in its relationship with God.
3. **New Testament** – The letters of Paul, or Peter, or James or from the Acts of the Apostles. We read them to get a sense of how the early church responded to Jesus' teachings, how they lived and practiced their beliefs.
4. **The Gospel** – We stand. These are Christ's own words. They demand our respect and attention. We lift the Book of the Gospels high for all to see, as we sing our Alleluias – our “Praise to the Lord” for his words of life. The priest (deacon) introduces the Gospel reading by making a small cross with his thumb, first on the words of the gospel reading, then a cross on his forehead, lips and heart. We do the same, as we all silently pray together, “Lord, be in my mind, my lips, and my heart – so that I may worthily hear, speak and live your

words.”

5. **Homily** - We sit. The word “homily” comes from the Greek word meaning “conversation.” In a family, our parents sit down with us and have conversations with us, to teach us and nurture our growth. Priests, who are our spiritual fathers, also teach and converse with us about God’s word for our lives..
6. **Silence** – the homily is followed by a brief period of silence, for us to reflect upon the word of God, to take it to heart and apply it to our lives.
7. **The Creed** - The Creed is a very important part of the Mass. Everywhere around the world the same articles of our faith are being professed and prayed in all the languages of humanity. So, with one voice, in many languages, we stand and profess the same beliefs. For centuries, this has been one of the ways our church has remained united in our beliefs and practices. The multiple parts of the Nicene Creed find their origins in the scriptures, and as statements made by those who were being baptized, professing what they believed. It was formulated in its present form in 325 at the Council of Nicea (in modern day Turkey) and further developed at the Council of Constantinople (also in Turkey) in 381. This creed has been prayed by Christians for centuries as a way to state what we believe about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, about death and resurrection, the Church, and the forgiveness of sins and the life to come
 - a. **Bowing** – we all bow when it comes to the part where we say, “...by the power of the Holy Spirit, He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man...” We bow because we give special reverence to the Incarnation – when Jesus took on our flesh and became one with us.
8. **Prayers of the Faithful** – We are not just here at Mass for ourselves and our own needs. In the Prayers of the Faithful we pray for needs that are above and beyond our own individual petitions. This is why we also respond together at the end of each one of these petitions: “Lord, hear OUR prayer.”

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

Now we shall look more closely at what happens during the Liturgy of Eucharist – when Jesus Christ comes to us under the veil of bread and wine, which are changed into his body and blood.

1. **The Preparation of the Gifts** - The early Christians each brought some bread and wine, along with other food and money, from their homes to the church to be used for the Mass and the works of the Church. *“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes”* 1 Cor 11:23-26. Today, the priest places the bread and wine on the table, blessing and giving thanks to the Father for the bread & wine. He mixes water with the wine and washes his hands, as was done at the Last Supper. Mixing water with wine and washing hands are things all Jews did at meals in Jesus’ day. Plus, the mixing of the water and wine are a symbol of the blood and water that flowed from the side of Jesus when he was struck by the Roman soldier.
2. **Incense the Altar** - In Psalm 141 the Jews prayed “like burning incense, O Lord, let my prayer rise up to you.” The Jews believed that the smoke of the burning incense was a symbol of their prayers rising up to God. Also, they saw the smoke as a form of blessing God, people and things – such as when the Jewish priest entered into the Holy of Holies each year to burn incense in the presence of God. Therefore, the Catholic priest incenses the bread & wine, the altar, and the crucifix, and the deacon incenses the priest and the congregation – as ways of offering up our prayers and connecting and preparing us all to receive the blessing that God will give us in the Eucharist. After the altar is prepared, the priest invites the people to pray to God that this offering is acceptable to him.
3. **The Eucharistic Prayer** – There are 13 forms of the Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman Rite. 4 Eucharistic Prayers for ordinary occasions, 4 for special occasions, 2 for reconciliation, and 3 for children. The earliest written Eucharistic prayer comes from the 2nd century – meaning, the Catholic Christians were celebrating the

Eucharist during biblical times and the earliest copy we have of their prayers outside of Scripture comes from the 2nd century. The Eucharistic Prayers bring us to the very center of the Mass and the heart of our faith. During the liturgy, the priest stands “in persona Christi” – in the person of Jesus Christ himself, offering himself to the Father in the one eternal sacrifice for our sins.

a. **The Preface** - Having remembered what God has done for us, we sing together the angelic hymn from the Bible - "Holy, holy, holy (see Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8). We join that to the triumphant Psalm sung by those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord . . ." (see Mark 11:9-10)

b. We Kneel

c. **The Institution Narrative & Consecration** – The words of Jesus in the Eucharistic prayer comes directly from Scripture. (see Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20). At this point, it is worth our time to delve a bit deeper into the scriptural foundations of our belief in the Eucharist.

1) Each gospel agrees Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal when he instituted the Eucharist. The Passover was the Jewish feast God instituted on the eve of Israel's flight from Egypt (see Exodus 12:1-28). This is significant, because Jesus is now the New Exodus, releasing us from captivity to sin. Like the blood of the lamb smeared on the door-post of the Jews – which protected them from the angel of death, Jesus gives us his blood to protect us from eternal death. The Eucharist is the New Passover – allowing us to “pass-over” from death to new and eternal life.

2) The command to "do this in memory of me" - For the Jews, time was not linear, it was cyclical, particular when it come to their religious experience and interpretation of time. Thus, for them to “remember” the Passover was not to think about it as only a past event, but literally to make it present, or “re-present” it in their own lives. This is what Jesus was doing and commanding: “Do this in memory of me.” Meaning: make this eternal act present in your life, here and now. Jesus is not a linear being (not a temporal being) Jesus, as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, is more...he is an eternal being. Thus his actions, including his

death and resurrection are eternal actions, which affect humanity's past, present and future. When Jesus comes to us in his body and blood, he is truly present as an eternal being in our present time. In other words, we as temporal beings come into his eternal presence when he comes to us in our time.

- d. **Epiclesis** – The priest places his hands over the bread & wine, calling the Holy Spirit to come upon them and make them holy.
- e. **Institutive Narrative** – The priest takes the bread & wine and literally repeats the words of Jesus at the last supper as he instituted the Eucharist, changing the bread & wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
 - 1) Ringing of the bells – 3x each – to call to our attention the moment of consecration. This little tradition comes from a time in the church when folks might have been engaged in their own private prayers during the Mass, when the Mass was offered in Latin.
- f. **Prayer for Unity and Intercession** – We offer intercessory prayers.
 - 1) We pray for unity. “May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit” (Eucharistic Prayer II).
 - 2) We add prayers for the Pope, the successor to Peter, upon whom Christ built his Church (Matt 16:18).
 - 3) We pray for our local bishop – a successor to the apostles who “shepherds” God’s local folk (Matt 18:18).
 - 4) We pray for the living and the dead and through the intercession of the saints...
 - a)Praying for the Dead – We pray for the dead. We have been doing it, even before the birth of Jesus. What better time to pray for the dead than when Christ is closer to us than at any other time and or place on earth, and when all the angels and saints are present, too. [*In 2 Maccabees 12:43-46 we hear: “He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he*

were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.”]

- b) Intercession of the Saints - Not only do those in heaven pray *with* us at the Mass, they also pray *for* us. In the book of Revelation, John sees that "the twenty-four elders [the leaders of the people of God in heaven] fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8). Thus the saints in heaven offer to God the prayers of the people on earth. Angels do the same thing. At the Mass, where Christ our Lord is present, all of his saints are also present, offering their praise of the Lamb of God and their prayers for us here at this celebration. This means that all of your loved ones, who have gone before you to heaven, are here at this moment, praying for you. This is both awesome and beautiful, comforting and powerful. It is also the truth.
- g. **Doxology** –The priest raises the consecrated bread and wine and offers a doxology, a prayer of praise to God in the name of Christ: “Through him, with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever.” Our “Amen” to this prayer acclaims our assent – our “yes” (see 2 Cor 1:20) and participation in the entire Eucharistic prayer.

The Communion Rite and Closing Rites

Now, let us look at what happens (and why) at the Communion Rite and concluding rites of the Mass, and what we are to do as we depart from the church building and return to our world beyond these sacred walls.

1. **The Our Father** –In the light of our beliefs about the Eucharist, let us look at the “Our Father” in a new way.
 - a. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...” (Jesus’ kingdom has come – here on this altar)...
 - b. “...thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (The Father’s will is that Jesus die for us and rise – so that we might have life. This is a reality that has been established on earth and in heaven, and we are entering into it whenever we worthily approach this altar to receive him)...
 - c. “...Give us this day our daily bread” (Jesus is our daily bread, the Bread of Life, the Eucharist). The Father is answering our prayer by giving us his Son in the Eucharist.
 - d. “...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (You must forgive your brother before you come to the altar of the Lord – Matt 5:24)...
 - e. “...and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (Here on this altar, the Lord is giving us the power to avoid temptation and the power to overcome evil – he is giving us himself)...
2. **The Sign (Kiss) of Peace** - This follows the Lord’s command in Matthew 5:24: "Leave your sacrifice on the altar there, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and make your offering." We make peace with those around us, who are most likely our family members, the very ones who often hurt the most.
3. **The Lamb of God** – In the Bible's final book, Jesus is called - no less than 28 times - *the Lamb*: Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the priest prays: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to His supper." The first part comes from John the Baptist as he identifies Jesus at the Jordan River; the second part is in fulfillment of Christ’s command at

the Last Supper. Our response to being in the presence of the Lamb of God is to drop to our knees (recognizing his divinity) and to pray: "Lord, I am not worthy, but only say the word and I shall be healed." These words repeat the words of the Roman soldier who wants Jesus healing power (see Luke 7:7).

4. **Holy Communion** – Jesus tells us in John’s gospel, chapter 6, that he is the bread of life, and says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:53–56).

a. Thus, the priest, or lay minister, proclaims a truth to us when we step up in the communion line and receive Jesus’ body and blood. “The Body of Christ,” and “The Blood of Christ.” And we give our “Amen” – which is also a statement of faith, meaning “Yes, It is so, it is true.”

b. Only Catholics can receive Holy Communion – Do you know why Christians of other denominations can receive one another’s communion but can’t receive our communion and we as Catholics cannot receive their communion? The answer: Because Christians of other Protestant denominations are all pretty much in “communion of belief” with one another regarding the Eucharist. They all pretty much believe that this is not the real body and blood of Jesus, but just a sign or symbol, a “spiritual communion,” but not real “union with Jesus” in his body and blood, soul and divinity. Thus, it is fine for them to have intercommunion. But, they believe differently from us. We have always believed one way about Jesus and communion, since the time of Jesus & the apostles, Paul and the early Christians. We believe this is truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Thus, when someone who does not share our beliefs wants to step up in our communion line, we want to respect the fact that they believe differently than us and ask them not to make a statement of faith in something that they don’t believe. A statement of faith is made by us through our bodies when we step into the communion line. Plus, communion is not just a vertical communion between God and the individual, but also a horizontal communion –

shared with everyone else in the Catholic Church in regards to our faith and practices. These two “communions” come together and find their center in Holy Communion, in the Eucharist, in the Body and Blood of Christ.

- c. When you have a friend or family member visiting us who is not Catholic, it is your duty to educate them about the Eucharist. You can let them know they can participate in every way in the Catholic Mass, except receive Holy Communion. Point them to the parts and prayers of the Mass in the front of the hymnal, so they can pray and worship with us.
- d. Orthodox Christians – Orthodox Christians can receive Holy Communion in a Catholic Church, as long as they are properly disposed and they spontaneously ask for it (meaning the minister doesn’t force it upon them or suggest it to them). This is particularly applicable when the Orthodox Christian doesn’t have a local church nearby where he/she can worship with their own community.
- e. Catholics normally should not go to “communion” at other Christian churches, because they believe in a different way about communion, particularly that is not the real presence of the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Plus, we do not have the same horizontal beliefs with them. They believe differently than us. Thus, truly and sadly, due to the division of humanity, we are not in full communion with each other. This present division should not be ignored, as if not important. Instead, we should always be praying for unity and working toward it. Regarding the Orthodox Christians, though, we can receive Holy Communion from them, especially if their own particular churches allow it and we are not fulfilling our Sunday Obligation with them.
- f. There are some Catholics who can’t receive Holy Communion. Why? Quite simply: those who have committed a mortal sin without going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and are not in the state of grace, are not properly disposed to be able to receive our Lord in his Eucharistic Presence. St. Paul taught: “Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of

the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Here St. Paul is pointing out that if the bread and wine are merely a sign or symbol of Jesus Christ, then it would be ridiculous for him to claim that receiving them would be an offense answerable to the death of Jesus Christ. How can we be condemned for unworthily receiving the Body & Blood of Jesus Christ if the Eucharist simply a representation of Jesus?

g. Holy Communion does forgive venial sins. However, if there are any mortal sins on the soul of the communicant, he/she must discern this, particularly during the Penitential Rite and refrain from receiving Holy Communion until they have a time to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and receive forgiveness of their serious sins. For example, sins related to the dignity of the human person and how God designed us to relate to each other:

- Co-habitation & pre-marital sex
- Marital infidelity
- Abortion
- Actively engaging in homosexual relations
- Divorce & remarriage without an annulment & validation of the marriage as a sacrament.

h. This brief list of sins is not meant to be an accusation, but rather to inform consciences and help us to return to the Sacrament of the Altar, after confessing our sins & making efforts to reform our lives. The Church tries to propose to truths of Jesus Christ through his Church, rather than simply impose them upon people. Ultimately, after we have been properly informed, we still have the freedom to follow or not follow our conscience, with positive or ill effects. The effects of un-repent mortal sins, particularly when we know it is mortal and choose to embrace it anyways, could be hell for all eternity. Finally, growing in the light of God’s truths, we must be patient with ourselves (as God is patient with us) and seek

the assistance necessary to overcome our inordinate attachments.

5. Some Holy Communion Etiquette

- a. We are asked to fast from food for one hour prior to receiving Holy Communion, so that on a fundamental level our bodies literally are hungry, and their hunger helps us remember to spiritually hunger for the Bread of Life - which feeds not the belly but the soul. If, however, there is a medical reason one cannot fast from, they should not fast. They might try some other form of “fast” which reminds them to hunger for the Eucharist. Likewise, they should never fast from medicine. They do not have to fast from water, either.
- b. A Catholic can receive Holy Communion more than once a day, as long as it takes place at the Mass (they attend the entire Mass).
- c. Bow before you receive Communion – Our bodies offer some sign of reverence acknowledging the Reality we are about to receive. So we bow. Bow before the person who is receiving the Eucharist, so as he/she finishes receiving and moves aside, you come out of the bow with your palms up or mouth open, ready to receive.
- d. Remember to say “Amen”
- e. Gluten-intolerant individuals – We have gluten free host. Please see Sr. Julie or Fr. Dave to let us know and we can arrange for you to receive gluten free host during Communion.
- f. You can also receive the Precious Blood, instead of the Body of Christ. The Blood has the Body and the Body has the Blood. We have the privilege, though, of being able to receive Christ in both forms. The common form in which we receive him is in the Sacred Host.
- g. If you have a cold – please refrain from receiving the Precious Blood.
- h. We are not normally allowed to receive by “intinction” – dipping the Host into the Blood, unless we attend an Eastern Catholic rite liturgy, like the Byzantine Mass.

The Final Blessing and Commissioning

When the Blessed Sacrament is reposed in the Tabernacle, this is the time when we can all sit. We do not have to wait for the altar to be cleared and the clergy to all be seated. We do not sit because the clergy sit, but because the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist has been placed in the tabernacle and it is no longer necessary to kneel. So, from this Mass forward, the congregation will sit when the Eucharist is reposed in the Tabernacle.

Following Communion, there is a period of silence, for us to offer our individual prayers and praise, to reflect upon what we have just received. As long as the elements of the bread and wine remain in our bodies, Christ is present in us in a very special way – through his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity (not just spiritually, as normal throughout our day). This time, therefore, is important for us to savor and bask in his presence.

Then, there is a final prayer. We are now prepared to go back to the world, where we will live for the coming week. The burdens we have laid down at the feet of Christ in the Eucharist, we must bear again—but now strengthened by this Eucharist and this community.

Before the end of the Mass, there are usually some announcements by the lector and/or priests. I can offer up to three or four and the lector can offer up to three or four, but everything must go through the Office Manager – because the pastor is a big pushover and will say “yes” to everything.

The priest then says, “The Mass is ended, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” The first part of this phrase in Latin is “*Ite, missa est.*” It is what gives the “Mass” its name in English. It means a “dismissal,” but also a “mission,” a sending, a “commissioning.” Just as Christ said to his apostles on the night of his resurrection, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21),” so we are sent – told to go (*Ite*)– into the world.. You are sent (*missa est*). Therefore, the goal of “Mass” is not just to participate in the salvific action of Jesus for our eternal life, but also to be “sent” out into the world with the presence of God to continue the work of Jesus as his disciples.

Conclusion

For the past four weeks of Lent, I have tried to present a basic understanding of the Scriptures, theology, and history as they relate to the Mass, in the hopes that better grasping all the prayers, gestures, symbols and actions of the Mass, we might grow in our appreciation of just what the Mass is really all about. The Mass is the total involvement of the individual in the act of

worshiping Jesus Christ in his word and sacrament and being transformed to become more and more like Christ as we prepare for heaven and bring heaven to the world.

What we say and hear in the Mass directly corresponds to the words and teachings of the Scriptures, because they were both developed by the Apostles of the Lord and early Christian community.

From the first Sign of the Cross to the last Amen, the Mass is a spiritual tapestry, woven with words, actions and even accessories related to the Bible. It employs the total person in worship of God: body, eyes and ears, smell, taste and touch.

We address God in words that He himself has given us through the inspired writers of Sacred Scripture. He in turn comes to us - instructing, exhorting and sanctifying us - through the living Word of the inspired Scriptures.

The Catholic Mass is the most sacred act of worship a person can participate in on earth. At the last supper, Jesus did something new, something never done before and yet something that would continue from that day until the end of time. He gave us the food of eternal life. He instituted the Holy Mass. This Mass is our means on Earth of drawing close to Christ to live out our salvation in this world.

Sources

This presentation was given at St. John Neumann Church as a four part series of homilies during Lent. The primary sources for this presentation were taken were taken from:

1. http://www.salvationhistory.com/online/beginner/begcourse2_home.cfm Scott Hahn and The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology.
2. <http://www.americancatholic.org/newsletters/cu/ac0889.asp> Fr. Thomas Richstatter, Catholic Updates
3. <http://www.tkc.net/projects.html> The Catholic Mass Revealed, Thy Kingdom Come, Inc. 2007
4. <http://www.usccb.org/nab/Bible/> The New American Bible
5. We Worship: A Guide to the Catholic Mass, by Fr. Oscar Lukefahr, 2004.

The above resources, particularly the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology, give far more in depth material than is possible to cover over a series of homilies. I simply wove together bits and pieces from among these resources in a manner that is appropriate for a presentation.