

Understanding the Mass, Praying the Mass

INTRODUCTORY RITES

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

“Christ is risen!” Those words convey a profound truth. Jesus Christ is risen. He is alive and living today as our Savior and Lord. He is not dead and gone.

We meet the risen Lord in many ways in our life as Christians, but the most profound way is in the celebration of the liturgy — “the source and summit of the Christian life.” Since the Mass is the highest form of liturgy, it follows that the Mass is the way we most perfectly come in contact with the risen Lord.

Beginning today, and continuing for the next few weeks, we will direct our attention to the Mass. As a parish, we will seek to grow in our understanding and appreciation of the Mass. In doing so we will grow in our knowledge of the liturgy, but even more importantly we hope to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ, the one who comes to us in word and sacrament and in priest and people during the Mass.

The Mass begins as we come together on Sunday, the day on which Jesus Christ was raised to life, the day on which he most often appeared to his disciples, and the day on which the Holy Spirit energized and brought life to the church. We gather on Sunday and by doing so we give flesh and blood to the risen Lord. The gathered Christian community, the church, gives witness to the presence of Christ.

Mass formally begins with a procession, a movement that reminds us that we are all on a journey of faith that began at baptism, leads to the altar, and one day will lead to God’s table in the kingdom of heaven. As we process, we sing our prayer and praise to God. How could we not sing? People who are joyful, people who are in love, people filled with life, sing.

Our singing at Mass is part of our community prayer. Mass is not a time for private prayer, for doing “my spiritual thing.” It is a time when we do things together for the sake of the Christian community. We stand, we sit, we kneel, we respond in prayer, and we do so at the same time as one community. The same should hold true with our sung prayer. When others lift their voices in sung prayer, each of us does the same. After all, we are part of the “team,” part of the “church family.”

We then sign ourselves with the cross. In doing so we are reminded that the cross marks us out as followers of the risen Lord. The cross was signed over us at baptism when we were claimed for Christ, and it will be the last sign made over us when we die. We are Christians. The cross is our “trademark.”

Then the priest says, “The Lord be with you.” We are reminded that the risen Lord is with us. We are not just a crowd but the Body of Christ, and by our “also with you” we challenge the priest to be more deeply aware of the risen Lord.

We then pause for the rite of penitence. We are asked to remember that before the Lord we all are unworthy, we all are sinners. But even more importantly, we are called to remember that the Lord has raised us to new life. The Lord has forgiven our sins. The Lord feeds us with his life-giving Body and Blood. That leads us to praise God for mercy as we proclaim, “Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy!”

The Gloria follows. We sing an ancient hymn of the church that proclaims glory to God and glory to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away our sins. During Advent we omit the Gloria so that it will stand out all the more at Christmas. It is also omitted during Lent since its joyful text is not in keeping with this more penitential season.

The priest then says, “Let us pray.” This is our time for silent prayer, a time for us to bring our needs and intentions before God. For what or whom do I want to pray during this Mass? What is my stake in this Mass? After our silent prayer, the priest prays the “collect” or “opening prayer.” This ritual prayer collects our prayers together and unites them with the prayer of the whole church.

- **Suggested action:** In light of the importance of the Introductory Rites, arrange your schedule so that you arrive a few minutes before Mass begins. ►

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LITURGY OF THE WORD

If you were God and you wanted to speak to the people of this world, what would you do? Would you boom your voice through the heavens so that everyone was sure to hear it? Would you spell out your message using the stars of heaven to form letters and words? Would you, perhaps, have everyone in the world dream the same dream and wake up remembering that special dream that contained your message? If you were God, what would you do?

I doubt that any one of us would choose to do what God actually does. God has chosen to speak God's message through the Scriptures. At Mass, when the Scripture readings are proclaimed by readers (imperfect human beings just like us), "God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 29).

The message of God is proclaimed in a very ordinary way — so ordinary that it can easily be missed. How often during the readings at Mass do we let our attention drift somewhere else?

The next time the first reading at Mass concludes and the reader says, "The word of the Lord," ask yourself, "What did I just hear? What was that word of the Lord?" If we can't answer that question, we still have another opportunity to hear God's voice, for God speaks again in the second reading, and then again in the Gospel.

If we are to hear the message of God, we need to listen to those readings as they are proclaimed. We need to listen with the realization that what we are hearing is not "old news" about people who lived long ago in a society very different from our own. Granted, the Scriptures were written some 1,900 to 3,500 years ago, yet they are always new, always "news." They are about us and about what God is doing in our world today. They are "good news." As we consider how God acted in the past, we can see how God is acting in the present.

Besides listening to the word of God at Mass, we also are proclaimers of that very word. As we sing the responsorial psalm, usually taken from the psalms of the Old Testament, we sing God's inspired word from the Scriptures. God's word finds a place on our lips.

Of the three readings at Mass, the Gospel is the most important. In it, the risen Lord speaks to his people. We highlight the importance of this reading by singing an acclamation, usually the Alleluia, as the Book of the Gospels is solemnly carried to the ambo.

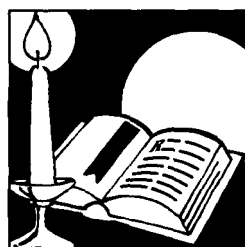
In the homily, which follows the Gospel, the preacher shares his reflection and understanding of the word of God. Through the lens of Scripture, he highlights what God is doing in our lives as Christians and in the world.

After the homily, we affirm what God has told us in the Scriptures as we say the Creed, or profession of faith. God has spoken his message to us and we say, "We believe."

Then, moved by the word of God and conscious of our Christian responsibility to help others, we pray for those in need in the prayer of the faithful, or general intercessions. A reader announces situations and people in need, and we hold them before God in prayer. In offering these petitions we are also reminded that we are called to respond. For we are often the instruments God wishes to use to answer our own petitions. With the prayer of the faithful, the Liturgy of the Word comes to a close.

If we were told that almighty God, who spoke to Moses in a burning bush and who spoke most perfectly in Jesus Christ, was going to speak tomorrow at 3 p.m. at city hall or in the town square, we would certainly be there. Yet God does speak each Sunday in a very powerful way in the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. Let us listen attentively. If we don't, we may miss the message that God wants to speak to us and that we need to hear.

- **Suggested action:** To prepare yourself to hear God's word proclaimed at Mass, read the text of the readings sometime during the week before. Or, to allow God's word to touch you more deeply, read over the readings again after Sunday Mass. See www.usccb.org/nab for the text of the readings.



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PRESENTATION OF THE GIFTS

We give gifts at Christmastime and on Valentine's Day. We give gifts for birthdays, bridal showers, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, and retirements. We give gifts for baptisms, confirmations, and first communions. We give gifts for all sorts of occasions and for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes we give gifts out of a sense of obligation; it's something we feel we have to do. We give gifts to reciprocate for a gift we received in the past. We give gifts for political reasons, to win favor with someone. And we give gifts out of love because someone has a special place in our heart. It's the gifts that we give simply out of love that we most enjoy giving, that we take the most time to select, and that we purchase with little regard to cost.

Gift-giving is associated with the next part of the Mass, the presentation of the gifts and preparation of the altar. This begins the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The presentation of the gifts begins with the collection. When I was first ordained, I thought the collection should be removed from the Mass. Collecting grubby, dirty money did not seem to fit this sacred time of prayer. Over the years, I have come to see the collection as a very important part of liturgy. After all, the collection is about giving, generosity, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness. And so is the Mass. So is all of Christianity — just look at the cross.

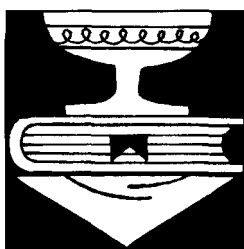
As the collection is taken up, we are challenged to be generous, self-sacrificing, and unselfish. We are challenged to be good stewards who support the church that is ours by baptism. We are challenged to recognize that all we possess is a gift from God.

The collection also makes us aware that money can easily control us. So much so, that we find it hard to part with our money. It's surprising how often Jesus spoke of money. Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus warned that the rich would only enter the kingdom of God with the greatest of difficulty. Jesus praised the poor widow who gave all she had to the temple. *Jesus spoke out about gaining the whole world and losing ourselves in the process.* Jesus knew that money could take over the human heart and crowd out the place that belongs to God alone. Our personal response in the collection is a good indicator of the control that money and material possessions have over us.

In addition to our monetary gifts, bread and wine are also brought forward to the altar. These gifts represent us. They represent our self-offering to God. As the bread and wine are brought forward we might ask ourselves what acts of kindness, love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice, what gifts of time and talent from the past week, could be represented by those gifts of bread and wine. As these gifts are placed on the altar, the priest acknowledges that these gifts we offer are from God. He prays, "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread/wine to offer . . ." It is God who gives us bread and wine. It is God who gives us our financial blessings. Indeed, it is God who gives us all we are and all we have. In gratitude, we return something of what God has given to us. As the Mass continues, those gifts will be infused with God's very life and returned to us. Our God is never outdone in generosity.

The priest then washes his hands as a sign of inner purification, and he invites the church assembled to pray that this sacrifice will be acceptable to almighty God.

- **Suggested action:** Consider your motivation and level of giving in the Sunday collection. Evaluate your stewardship of time, talent, and treasure.



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EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

“Now, what are you supposed to say?” All of us probably heard those words from our parents when we were growing up. A relative, neighbor, or friend would present us with a gift and our parents would immediately remark to us, “Now, what are you supposed to say?” Those words would remind us to say, “Thank you.”

Expressing thanks and gratitude was one of the most important lessons that our parents tried to teach us. They wanted saying “Thank You” to become a habit in our life. Expressing our thanks should also be a habit in our spiritual lives. For everything we have, everything we are, is a gift from God for which we are to express our thanks.

The eucharistic prayer, the central prayer of the Mass, is all about expressing thanks and praise to God. This prayer begins with the invitation, “Lift up your hearts.” “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” By that invitation the church, in a sense, says to us, “Now, what are you supposed to say?”

In the eucharistic prayer, which the priest prays in our name, we gratefully recall the wonderful things God has done for us. God created us. God invited us into a relationship. God did

not abandon us when we turned away and sinned. In Jesus, God took on flesh and came among us. Jesus gave his life in service, love, and obedience to God. In doing so, Jesus Christ responded to God’s love for God’s people. Jesus was humanity’s perfect “Yes” to God, and by that “Yes” we were raised to a new relationship with God, one that will last forever.

During the eucharistic prayer, we recall the Last Supper that Jesus had with his apostles. We pray that the Holy Spirit, which came upon Jesus, may come upon our gifts of bread and wine and transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ. And we ask that we who are nourished by this holy food may be transformed by that Holy Spirit and “become one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III).

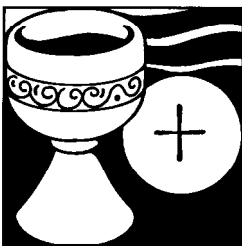
The eucharistic prayer also invites us to prayerfully remember the members of God’s church throughout the world, as well as those members who have died. We ask that the living may be strengthened in faith and that the dead may be brought into the light and peace of God’s heavenly kingdom.

This central prayer of the Mass also includes three sung acclamations by the assembly: the “Holy,” the memorial

acclamation, and the Great Amen. In the “Holy” we join the angels of heaven in giving thanks and glory to God. In the memorial acclamation we proclaim the paschal mystery that says by dying Jesus gained new life. And in the Great Amen we ratify the prayer that the priest has proclaimed in our name to our generous, loving God. We make it our own.

There are 10 versions of the eucharistic prayer currently in use. Each begins with the invitation to “Lift up your hearts” to the Lord, and each ends with the Great Amen. Each proclaims what God has done for us, and each gives us the opportunity to say exactly what we are supposed to say to God each Sunday and each day of our life: “Thank you!”

- **Suggested action:** Each day call to mind at least one blessing that you have received from God that day. Bring those blessings to mind before the start of the eucharistic prayer. Doing so will help you to more fully enter into the spirit of gratitude and thanks that should be yours during this central prayer of the Mass.



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COMMUNION RITE

If someone who knew nothing of the Catholic faith and who could not understand the language being spoken were to come into church and watch the celebration of Mass, he or she would conclude that we care a great deal about eating and drinking. After all, the person would notice a table (the altar) occupying the central location in the church. The person would see bread and wine being treated with respect and reverence. The person would see cups (chalices) for wine and plates (communion vessels) for bread. The person would see people coming forward to eat and to drink.

The communion rite involves our eating and drinking. It involves God returning to us the gifts of bread and wine that we presented earlier, gifts that symbolize the offering of ourselves to God, but gifts now consecrated, changed, and transformed into God's living presence.

The communion rite of Mass begins with the Lord's Prayer. We ask the Father for our "daily bread," the bread we need to live from day to day and the bread that will bring us to everlasting life. We ask the Father to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We seek forgiveness for our sins and the grace to forgive those who have sinned against us.

The sharing of the "sign of peace" follows. This is not a greeting but rather

a gesture by which we pledge that the Lord's gift of peace and reconciliation will flow through us and out to others. We then sing the "Lamb of God" as the consecrated bread and wine are prepared for sharing. When all is ready, the priest invites the assembly to come forward to share the Body and Blood of Christ. "Happy are those called to his supper." As we process to the altar, we demonstrate our love and unity in Christ as we sing the words of the communion song.

When we stand before the communion minister, we bow our head as a sign of our reverence for the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The minister then says, "The body of Christ" or "The blood of Christ." Those words proclaim that the consecrated bread and the consecrated wine are the living presence of Jesus Christ. They are infused with God's very life. Those words also proclaim that in some way we too are the Body and Blood of Christ. As St. Augustine teaches, we are what we receive. By our "Amen" we affirm our belief in the Eucharist and we renew our baptism, the sacrament that made us part of the church, part of the Body of Christ.

As we share in communion, we should take advantage of the privilege given us to receive not only the host, but also the consecrated wine. By doing so, communion stands out more clearly as a holy meal. By doing so, we respond

to Christ's own invitation "to take and eat" and "to take and drink."

In the silence that follows communion, we give thanks for the Eucharist, and we reflect on how by sharing communion we become one holy communion with God and with one another. This time of silence ends as the priest stands and says the prayer after communion. This prayer asks that the Body and Blood of Christ may help us live as faithful Christians so that one day we may have a place of joy at God's heavenly table.

As Mass ends, the priest blesses us and commissions us to love and serve the Lord. We sing a final hymn of praise and then we go forth to imitate Christ's example of love and service in our daily lives. We go forth to bring Christ to the world!

Yes, we as Christians are concerned about what we eat and drink. We are especially concerned about the holy food and drink that make us one with God and one with our fellow Christians. "Happy are those who are called to his supper!"

- **Suggested action:** As you share in communion, remember that by receiving the Body and Blood of the Christ, you are united with Christ and with your fellow Christians in one holy communion of love. ►



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THE IMPORTANCE OF MASS

Can someone be a good person without coming to church on Sunday? The answer to that question is “Absolutely yes!” A person can be kind, loving, generous, forgiving, patient, trustworthy, and much more without coming to Mass.

Can someone be a good Christian without coming to Sunday Mass? The answer to that question is “Absolutely not!” A person cannot be a good Christian without joining his or her fellow Christians at Sunday Mass. For Christianity is not primarily about being kind, loving, generous, and patient — though, of course, a Christian should be those things. Christianity is not about following an ethical code of conduct or just being “nice.” Christianity is about following a person. Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The way we come in contact with Jesus Christ is through his church, especially when the church gathers for the celebration of Sunday Mass. Sunday is the day the Lord rose from the dead. Sunday is the day he most often appeared to his disciples. Sunday is the day he sent the Holy Spirit to enliven the church. And Sunday is the day the Lord comes to be with us in a powerful way as we gather for Mass.

In the gathering of the Christian community, the risen Lord appears once more, but now in the flesh and blood of his followers: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am.” From the earliest days of the church,

Christians have gathered on Sunday. In fact, one surprising definition of Christians is simply this, “Christians are people who gather on Sunday.”

If we want to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we need to be there when Christ is most powerfully present, namely, in the Sunday gathering of the church. At Sunday Mass, the risen Lord speaks to us in the word. In the Scripture readings, the Lord comforts and consoles us and challenges and confronts us with our sinfulness.

At Sunday Mass, the example of Jesus Christ is set before us. He emptied himself in love and service to those in need and in faithfulness and obedience to the Father, even to death on the cross. In response, God filled him with new life and raised him as Savior and Lord. By example, Jesus Christ challenges us to give of ourselves, to give our time, our talent, and our treasure, so there might be space in our heart for God to fill us, to transform us.

At Mass, God gives us his very life as we share the Body and Blood of the Lord in holy communion. We become one with the Lord, who told us, “Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you.” We need to receive the Eucharist to be connected with the Lord, just as branches need to be connected to the vine to have life. Sharing the Body and Blood of Christ also unites us with our fellow Christians who share at the same altar. We become “one holy communion.”

The Mass soon ends, and we are sent to love and serve the Lord. We are sent to be kind, loving, forgiving, patient, and self-sacrificing. And that’s what we can be, strengthened by the Eucharist that we have shared and encouraged by the love and example of Christ and of the Christian community.

Sunday Mass is absolutely essential for a Christian. In celebrating Mass we are changed and made more like Christ. As surely as a block of granite is changed by an unceasing drip of water on it, so we are changed by Sunday Mass. Sunday by Sunday, month by month, year by year, we gather with our fellow Christians, and slowly our hearts are changed. Little by little, we are transformed into the one we meet in Eucharist, we become more like Christ — more Christ-ian.

As the late Pope John Paul II wrote, “It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly.” The Mass is essential for our Christian life; without it our faith withers and dies. That’s why, as someone put it, “The devil dances for joy when a Catholic stops going to Mass.”

- **Suggested action:** Make Sunday Mass a part of your weekly schedule of important activities. Place Sunday Mass on your personal calendar, and give the devil no reason to dance!

