

## INTRODUCTION

“Do this in memory of me.” In his book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Don Gregory Dix, in reflecting on these words of Jesus, writes:

*Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done in every conceivable human circumstance for every conceivable human need, from infancy and before it, to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a country church...for the famine of a whole province or for the soul of a dear lover...and best of all, week by week, and month by month, on a hundred thousand Sundays, faithfully, unflinchingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, priest and people continue to work together in order to carry out this command, “Do this in Memory of me.”*

From this beautiful reflection on the Lord’s command, one can readily see how important and central the Mass has been to Catholic life down through the ages. In the words: “Do this in memory of me,” Jesus commanded the Apostles and their successors to repeat his Eucharistic actions and words,” until he comes again” (1 Cor 11:26).

For Catholics, the Mass is the sacred action of Christ and his Church. The memorial of his death and resurrection is celebrated; God is adored in spirit and in truth. The Church identifies herself with the saving sacrifice that her Lord perpetuates and, nourished by his Body and Blood, looks forward in joyful hope to sharing in the supper of the Lamb in the heavenly kingdom. Over the centuries this mystery of our faith has been given a number of names to illumine its saving grace, The Breaking of the Bread; the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Eucharistic Assembly, the Liturgy. The word *liturgy* is derived from the Greek work *leitourgia*, which literally means, work of the people’. When Christians gather together to celebrate *liturgy* they are participating in ‘the work of God’, which is our eternal salvation in and through Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “through the Liturgy, our redeemer on high, continues the work of our redemption in, with and through his church (# 1069).

When the bishops of our universal church gathered in Rome in the early 1960’s for Vatican Council II, they stressed the central importance of the Mass for Catholics. They said that the Mass was the “center of the Christian community”, “the source and summit of the Christian life”, “the center and the culmination of the entire life of the Christian community”, roots, source, center, and summit: The Mass is at the heart of our faith and life. In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Council Fathers stated that:

*...full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else: for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. #14*

The same document stressed the responsibility of pastors to ensure the full and active participation of the people.

*Pastors of souls must realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and licit celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part knowingly, actively and fruitfully. #11*

*With zeal and patience, pastors of souls must promote the liturgical instruction of the faithful and also their active participation in the liturgy both internally and externally. #19*

*The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a proper appreciation of the rites and prayers they should participate knowingly, devoutly, and actively. #48*

As a pastor of many souls in a large parish, it is my hope that this book will help its readers to grow in their understanding and appreciation of the Mass. You will find here a commentary on each part of the Mass and suggestions on how you can enter into the Mass more *consciously, actively* and *fruitfully*.

# I

## THE MASS ROOTED IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The Mass is not something that mere mortals created. Rather, it is the creation of Jesus himself. This is how St. Paul, writing to Christian converts in Corinth around 60 AD, described the institution of the Eucharist.

*I received from the Lord what I handed on to you,  
Namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed  
took bread and after he had given thanks, broke it and said,  
“This is my body, which is for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me.”  
In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying,  
“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.  
Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”  
Every time, when you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
You proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes!*

1 Cor 11:23-26

For other scriptural references on the institution of the Eucharist see Matthew 26:26-30, Mk 11:22-26, Lk 22:14-20.

We are very fortunate to have a description of the Mass that was written about 150 AD, which is a little over 100 years after Jesus died. The following description was written by St. Justin Martyr in a letter to a Roman Emperor. The words in brackets are my addition.

*On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place.*

*The memoirs of the apostles, (a reference to writings of the New Testament) and the writings of the prophets (the Old Testament) are read, as much as time permits.*

*When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. (The Homily)*

*Then we all rise together and offer prayers for our selves.... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. (General Intercessions)*

*When the prayers are concluded, we exchange the kiss. (Sign of Peace)*

*Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. (Presentation of Gifts)*

*He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgiving, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: ‘Amen’ (Eucharistic Prayer)*

*When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the “eucharisted” bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent. (A reference to the distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ and to our pastoral practice of taking communion to the sick and homebound. [Catechism of the Catholic Church #1345])*

It is comforting and important to be aware that the Mass we celebrate today is almost identical in structure and content to the Eucharist that the early Christians celebrated 2,000 years ago. When Catholics gather to celebrate Eucharist, they are acting in obedience to the Lord’s command to “do this in memory of me”. Not only that, but they are celebrating this memorial of the Lord’s death and resurrection in a manner very similar to how our ancestors in the faith celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

### **Jesus is present and active at every Mass**

Article 27 of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* reminds us of the fourfold presence of Christ in the Liturgy.

- Jesus is present in the *assembly* gathered in his name.
- Jesus is present in the *Presider* who represents Christ, the head of his Body.
- Jesus is present in the *Word* proclaimed.
- And, Jesus is present in the *Eucharistic species* – in the bread and wine.

During our celebration of the Lord’s Supper it is Jesus:

- Who *calls* us and *gathers* us together so that we might offer fitting worship to God. (Introductory Rites)
- It is Jesus who speaks to us when the Word of God is proclaimed. (Liturgy of the Word)
- It is Jesus who takes our *prayer of praise and thanks* to the heavenly altar and who shares with us his *body and blood*. (Liturgy of the Eucharist)
- It is Jesus who *commissions* us to go forth to continue his saving work in the world. (Concluding Rites)

The Holy Spirit is also present in our community worship helping us to open our minds and hearts to God and to each other, helping us to worship God in spirit and in truth. In Romans 8:26, Paul reminds us “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought.*”

## II

### RITUAL GESTURES AND POSTURES

In their Pastoral Resource on the Liturgy, *Introduction to the Mass*, the U.S. Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy states:

*Since worship engages Christians fully, in every aspect of their being, they worship God with their bodies and feelings as well as their minds and spirits, with their hands and feet as well as their eyes and ears. The non-verbal elements of the Liturgy can express what cannot be articulated in words and, at times, can reinforce the spoken word. Because of their importance, the gestures and postures of the Liturgy are to be given the attention they require. #27*

Our celebration of the Eucharist is filled with many sacred gestures and postures. For example:

- When Catholics enter a church they usually *bless themselves with holy water* – a reminder of our baptism in Christ.
- Before they enter a pew, they will *genuflect* or *bow* as an act of adoration and mark of respect for the Eucharist. Every Catholic Church has a *Tabernacle* where hosts are kept. Catholics believe that Jesus *continues* to be truly present in the hosts after the celebration of Mass has finished. Each Tabernacle has a lighted sanctuary lamp beside it.
- In Christian liturgical tradition, *standing* is the posture of an Easter people lifted up to greet the Risen Lord. We stand to give praise and thanks to God. We stand when we chant the gospel acclamation and to listen to Christ speak to us during the proclamation of the gospel.
- During Mass, the assembly *sits* to listen and meditate on the word of God and during the homily.
- The assembly *kneels* as an expression of our creatureliness before God, as a sign of contrition for sin and as an action of adoration and reverence.

Some other gestures used during Mass are: *bowing* which is a natural and gracious sign of respect, *kissing* (the altar and the book of the Gospels) as a more intense expression of reverence. *Joined hands* as an expression of prayerfulness and *striking the breast* as a sign of humility and contrition.

When we carry out external postures and gestures in a dignified way, we honor God and we communicate to all around us that we are in a sacred space and involved in a sacred and holy action. The December 2004 edition of the magazine *U.S. Catholic* had an article on the Eucharist, which tells the beautiful story of a Protestant Minister who attended a Catholic funeral Mass. The author of the article writes:

*I learned from a Protestant pastor that if we celebrate Mass with faith and attention and sing with enthusiasm, we are enriching the sacramental experience of everyone else around us.*

*This local Protestant pastor came to a funeral at our church because the deceased woman had been married to a man from his congregation. Our pastor invited him to proclaim one of the scripture readings, so he was seated near the altar for the whole funeral. On the way down the aisle afterward, our priest noticed tears streaming down the man's face. When they got to the sacristy, the*

*priest asked if he was all right. "Oh, I'm fine," he said. "It's just that the ritual was so sincere." This man came from a church that didn't believe in ritual. They thought that ceremony and ritual were just window dressing, some decorative flourishes that had no meaning. And this man was experiencing for the first time, up close and personal, the power of religious ritual. "The ritual was so sincere" that it moved him to tears. It was so powerful that he started coming to weekday Mass at our church and attended a whole year of RCIA sessions.*

*Interestingly, only once did this man experience the sincerity of our rituals from standing by the altar next to our pastor. All the other times he experienced it in the pews from the way parishioners participated and prayed. It made me realize more deeply that we all help to make our liturgical rituals sincere. The question raised by the incident is: If a visitor or neighbor or children from our own family watch us participate at Mass, will they comment on how sincere the ritual is? Will they be moved to tears?*

### III

#### THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

Each Mass has:

- **INTRODUCTORY RITES**
- **LITURGY OF THE WORD**
- **LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST**
- **CONCLUDING RITES**

The two main parts of the Mass are, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. But as GIRM reminds us these two parts 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.” (#28)

#### Introductory Rites

*The purpose of the Introductory Rites is to ensure that the faithful who come together as one establish communion and dispose themselves to listen properly to God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily. (GIRM #46)*

The Introductory Rites of the Mass consist of:

- Entrance Procession and song.
- Sign of the Cross and greeting
- The Act of Penitence
- Gloria
- Opening Prayer.

#### *ENTRANCE PROCESSION AND SONG*

The Mass begins when the Cantor invites the assembly to rise and join in the singing of the *entrance song*, which accompanies the *entrance procession*. The purpose of the entrance song is to *unify* those gathered into a community so that together they can offer true worship to the Father. Ideally, we not only sing the entrance song and all the other songs of the Mass but we *pray* them. We *pray* the songs at Mass by paying attention to the words and by raising our minds and hearts to God in worship. Often the entrance song is seasonal in nature, reflecting one of the liturgical seasons of the year. It may also reflect the scriptures that will be proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word.

When those involved in the entrance procession reach the sanctuary area of the church, they bow before the altar as a gesture of respect. The deacon places the Book of the Gospels on the altar, which emphasizes the interconnection between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The presider and the deacon *venerate* the altar with a kiss. The altar-table symbolizes Christ. The kissing of the altar at the beginning of Mass is an act of greeting to Christ through whom our worship ascends to the Father. The *processional* cross is placed in the sanctuary near the altar to remind us of the intimate connection between the Mass and Calvary. Sometimes the priest incenses the altar and the cross as another gesture of respect for these sacred objects. In Christian tradition, the ascending smoke of the incense symbolizes the prayer of our hearts rising up to God: “*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you.*” (Ps. 141:2)

### *The Sign of the Cross and Greeting*

After venerating the altar, the presider and deacon move to the Presidential chair. When the *entrance song* ends, the presider and assembly join together by making the Sign of the Cross. Signing ourselves with the cross reminds us of two basic truths of Christianity: namely, that we begin all things in God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that we are a people saved by the cross of Christ. When we make the sign of the cross we proclaim that we belong to Christ and that he is our way to the Father. Concerning this gesture the late Romano Guardini, writes: “*When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. . . let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us . . . It is the holiest of all signs.*”

After the Sign of the Cross, the presider addresses the assembly with a formal greeting. The Greeting Address is based on words of St. Paul when he greeted communities to whom he was writing. Our beautiful Trinitarian greeting says:

“*The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*” Or the presider may use the shorter greeting form: “*The Lord be with you*” The assembly responds: “*and also with your spirit.*”

In the greeting the presider and assembly remind each other that the risen Lord Jesus is in their midst, leading them in perfect worship of the Father. While offering the Greeting, the presider extends his arms in a gesture of warm welcome. He welcomes all in the name of Christ.

### *The Act of Penitence*

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to us: “*If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift* (5:23-26). In Mark 11:25 Jesus says to us: “*When you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody.*” The *Act of Penitence* is an opportunity for the gathered community to recognize its sinfulness and praise God for his mercy. The focus here is not primarily on us and our sins, but rather on Jesus and his mercy. The *Act of Penitence* reminds us that we are a community always in need of inner renewal and always in need of God’s mercy.

The Act of Penitence is usually expressed in one of the following forms:

- *The Confiteor*

*I confess to almighty God,  
and to you, my brothers and sisters,  
that I have sinned through my own fault*

*in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done,  
and in what I have failed to do;  
and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin,  
all the angels and saints,  
and you, my brothers and sisters,  
to pray for me to the Lord our God.*

In this beautiful prayer, we recognize that sin not only hurts our relationship with God, but also, hurts our relationship with others. It tells us that we can sin in our thoughts, words, in what we have done (sins of remission) and in the good we have failed to do (sins of omission). It ends with a plea to Mary, the angels, the saints and the community to intercede for us that God will grant us the grace

- *The Triple Invocation of Christ for his mercy.*

You were sent to heal the contrite, Lord have mercy  
You came to call sinners, Christ have mercy  
You plead for us at the right hand of God, Lord have mercy

*The Sprinkling Rite.* On special occasions especially during the Easter Season, a Rite of Sprinkling replaces the *Act of Penitence*. This *ritual act* reminds us of our baptism when we were received into God's family, washed clean of sin and filled with God's life and grace. When the water is sprinkled on us, we make the sign of the cross.

### *The Gloria*

The Gloria is one of the church's most ancient and solemn hymns. It is a song of joy and praise to God. The purpose of the Gloria is to sing God's praise, thus preparing our hearts and minds to more fully and worthily celebrate the holy mysteries. The Gloria is omitted during the seasons of Advent and Lent because of their penitential nature.

### *Opening Prayer (Collect)*

The late professor of sacramental theology, Fr. Johannes Emminghaus likens the opening prayer "to a musical overture, which summarizes the principal motif and atmosphere of the day. It sets the tone and focus of the liturgy and expresses the theme of the celebration, be it a Sunday, a feast day, a fixed season, a memorial of a saint, or a remembrance of the dead". (*The Eucharist, Essence, Form Celebration*). This prayer opens with an invitation to pray: "Let us pray." Then follows a brief silence during which the gathered faithful are invited to become aware of the Holy Spirit and see what might be the prayer in their heart at this time, which they wish the presider to present to God on their behalf. Then with out-stretched arms, the presider gathers or 'collects' as it were, all the petitions of the gathered assembly and presents them to God through Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In her excellent book *The Mass, its Rituals, Roots and Relevance*, Joan Carter McHugh calls the *opening prayers* of the Mass "spiritual gems, which contain lofty doctrinal content. Notable their economy of words" (page 48). A good example is the *Alternate Opening Prayer* for Trinity Sunday:

*God, we praise you:  
Father all-powerful, Christ Lord and Savior, Spirit of love.  
You reveal yourself in the depths of our being,  
Drawing us to share in your life and your love.*

*One God, three Persons,  
be near to the people formed in your image,  
close to the world your love brings to life.  
We ask you this, Father, Son, and Holy spirit,  
one God, true and living, for ever and ever.*

*Our behavior at Mass is contagious.*

When the cantor or song leader invites us to sing the *entrance song*, we can respond by opening our hymnal and singing as best we can or we can ignore the invitation and become a silent spectator at Mass. It is important for us to be aware that our behavior at Mass is *contagious*. We can impact those around us in a positive or negative way. When we sing with enthusiasm, pray devoutly, listen intently, show warmth and hospitality to those around us, place a money offering in the collection basket and receive the Body and Blood of Christ with love and faith, we impact in a very positive way the worship atmosphere for those around us. On the other hand, when our presence at Mass is cold, distracted and uninvolved, we diminish the whole worship atmosphere for those around us. A powerful example of how our active participation at Mass can impact those around us is given in the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. Prior to his conversion from his sinful way of life, Augustine would come to church to listen to the homilies and the singing. Concerning the chanting of songs, Augustine writes:

*I wept at the beauty of your hymns.  
The sounds flowed into my ears,  
and the truth streamed into my heart . . .*

What a beautiful testimony to the power of song to open our hearts to God. On any given Sunday at Mass, we never know how our devout participation or lack of participation in the Mass is impacting those around us – especially the visitor. Our behavior at Mass may be the reason that a visitor may or may not return.

In the *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, the Vatican II Fathers said: “*In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain*” (#11)

When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist we must be ready to cooperate with God’s grace, grace that will unite us and diminish or even destroy all the harsh, bitter, distrustful and unforgiving attitudes that polarize us. We must make our own Jesus prayer for unity at the Last Supper: “*I pray that they may be one, as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me*” (John 17:20).

## IV

### LITURGY OF THE WORD

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Heb. 4:12

*When the Sacred Scriptures are read in church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel. Therefore, all must listen with reverence to the readings from God's word. (GIRM # 29)*

*The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided. It is also appropriate to include periods of brief silence. . . in which, at the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. (GIRM # 56)*

The Liturgy of the Word consists of:

- First Reading
- Responsorial Psalm
- Second Reading
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel
- Homily
- Profession of Faith
- General Intercessions

#### *A Church Calendar with Three Cycles*

Our church liturgical calendar has *Three Cycles* – *A, B, C*. During *Cycle A*, the gospel reading is normally from Matthew. During *Cycle B*, it is normally from Mark and during *Cycle C* the gospel reading is normally from Luke. During the Easter season of all three cycles, the gospel reading is from *John*.

On Sundays and major feasts, we have three readings from scripture. On weekdays we have two readings. The readings are proclaimed from the *ambo*. Just as we are nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ from the *altar*, the table of the Eucharist, we are nourished with God's word from the ambo, the table of God's word. The assembly is seated, a posture of receptivity and attentiveness. The first and second readings are proclaimed from a book called the *Lectionary* (lectio –to read) and the gospel passage is proclaimed from the *Book of the Gospels*.

In general, the readings are stories of God's plan to make us his own people. The readings speak of creation, humanity's sin and God's redemption, God's call and our response or our failure to respond, our woundedness and God's healing, and God's constant desire to draw us to himself and our resistance to his overtures.

### *First Reading*

The first reading on Sundays and major feasts is usually from the Old Testament, except during the *Easter Season* when it is from the Acts of the Apostles. (Acts tell us how the Early Christian communities were living witnesses to the Good News of the Resurrection, which is the focus of the Easter season.) The Old Testament Scriptures tell us of how God intervened into the long and torturous history of the Israelite people, offering them love and salvation. In these scriptures we see a God who is gradually revealing himself to his Chosen People. Many of the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament.

The first reading is chosen to connect with the Gospel in some way. The connection between the Old Testament passage and the Gospel passage is not always clear and could easily be missed. Sometimes the connection is one of *prophecy-fulfillment*. What is prophesied in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament. Sometimes the connection is one of *contrast*. The first reading may narrate some negative attitudes towards lepers and sinners and in contrast the gospel may speak of Jesus' mercy and care for the outcast and sinner.

### *Silence*

Several times during Mass, there are moments for silent prayer. During the Liturgy of the Word there should be a moment of silence, after the first and second readings and after the homily. Concerning the importance of liturgical silence, the US Bishops committee on the liturgy has these beautiful words to share with us.

*Liturgical silence is not merely an absence of words, a pause, or an interlude. Rather, it is a stillness, a quieting of spirits, a taking of time and leisure to hear, assimilate, and respond. Any haste that hinders reflectiveness should be avoided. The dialogue between God and the community of faith taking place through the Holy Spirit requires intervals of silence, suited to the congregation, so that all can take to heart the word of God and respond to it in prayer. (Introduction of the Mass #48)*

### *The Responsorial Psalm*

The psalm, which follows the first reading, is called *responsorial* because it is a prayer (ideally a sung prayer) of *response* to the word of God that we just heard in the first reading. The psalm usually echoes some thought expressed in the first reading. In his book *Mystery of Faith*, Lawrence Johnson writes: *The responsorial psalm is not just a response to the reading. It also helps the gathered assembly create an atmosphere of prayer, one in which all can recall what God has done and continues to do. To a certain extent the psalm serves as a meditative prolongation of the readings, offering us through poetry a rich opportunity to savor the Word of God. (P. 36)*

### *Second Reading*

The second reading is always from one of the letters in the New Testament or from the book of Revelation. The reading may be a teaching on some issue or it may address a pastoral problem. It gives us a glimpse into the attempts of the early Christians to follow the ways of Christ. Even though one *may* sometimes notice a connection between the second reading and the first reading or the gospel, this was not the intention of the compilers of the lectionary. During Ordinary Time, the second reading is a semi-continuous passage from one of the Epistles. During the major seasons and Feasts, the second reading is chosen to harmonize with the other readings.

## *Gospel Acclamation and Gospel*

The proclamation of the Gospel is the climactic moment of the Liturgy of the Word since it is always about Christ and what he has said and done. During the *Gospel Acclamation* and the *Gospel*, we stand. Our standing is an outward expression of joy for the Good News that we are about to hear. It is also a mark of respect for Jesus who is about to address us. (The word Gospel means Good News.)

The Gospel Acclamation, which is chanted prior to the Gospel, is a joyful chant, which accompanies the Gospel procession. The Book of the Gospels, which was placed on the altar or on a special stand at the beginning of Mass, is now brought in procession to the ambo, accompanied by two candle bearers. Sometimes, the presider or deacon incenses the Gospel before it is proclaimed. The joyful chanting, the procession with candles and incense are all intended to highlight for us the supreme importance of what is about to take place, namely, Jesus addressing us.

Before the deacon proclaims the gospel, he receives a blessing from the presider who quietly prays, *“May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips so that you may worthily proclaim the gospel of the Lord.”* Before the gospel is proclaimed all present make a threefold sign of the cross on their forehead, lips and heart. While no official commentary on the Mass tells us the meaning of this gesture, it is often explained as a prayer in which we say “may the Lord be in my *mind* that I may know the word of God and on my *lips* that I may speak the word of God and in my *heart* that I may love the word of God.” When finished proclaiming the Gospel, the priest or deacon kisses the Book of Gospels as a mark of loving respect quietly saying, *“May the Word of the Gospel wipe away our sins.”*

During the proclamation of the readings, our primary challenge is to be an *active listener* to allow God’s word to speak to our hearts. This is especially challenging if we are self-preoccupied, or if the reader does a poor job of proclaiming the word or if the readings are difficult to understand. In an “age of noise” when we have learned to tune out the barrage of words coming at us all day long, it may be particularly difficult for us to hear words written thousands of years ago to another people living at a time very different from ours. Each Sunday, we must make a deliberate decision to open our hearts to hear God’s message. We need to pray for a “Mary-heart”, a heart that is receptive and responsive to God. We might pray: *“Lord, cleanse my heart of all obstacles that block me from hearing your word. Make my heart be rich soil where your word can bear fruit a hundred fold.”*

## *The Homily*

The French liturgist, Father Lucien Deiss, describes the purpose of the homily in this way: *“The homilist must show this particular congregation how the word they have just heard is relevant to their lives. He helps them to hear Christ’s voice and see Christ’s face in the sacred text. The homilist leads the assembly to look at itself, its joys, its sorrows, its problems, and judge them in the light of God’s Word.”* In other words, a good homily will link the life of this particular congregation with the readings just proclaimed. Good homilies will both encourage and challenge us. They will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Drawing from my own experience, the following are four practical ways that you can help priests and deacons in their ministry of preaching.

- *Pray* that God’s Spirit may guide the homilist in creating a homily that will be truly Good News for all who hear it.

- *Pray* for the *assembly* that they may have open and receptive hearts and that each person may hear the word God wants them to hear on this particular Sunday.
- As the homily is being delivered, try to be an *active and attentive listener*. Your expression of attentiveness and expectancy helps to draw the best from the homilist. On the contrary, nothing can discourage the best-intentioned homilist more than an assembly of faces that are expressionless, distracted and seemingly just wanting to get through the Mass as quickly as possible.
- Risk making *constructive suggestions* to the homilist especially if you are someone who has taken the time to give positive feedback. Suggestions for improvement should be within the capability of the homilist.

Finally, a word of caution: most, if not all of us, may need to be aware of the attitude that turns us off to a certain priest or deacon just because we do not like him or his liturgical style or because we have decided that God cannot speak to us through him. If God was able to speak to Balaam through his donkey (Numbers 22:22-35), surely he can speak to us through priests or deacons however poor or unworthy they may be as his spokesmen. There is no homily so bad that we cannot get at least one idea from it for our lives.

After the homily, there is another period of *silent reflection*, the purpose of which is to give us the time to be still with the word and to ask ourselves: “What does this word mean for my life? What *action* is required of me so that the word just proclaimed and preached becomes a living word in my life?” “*Lord, you just spoke to me. What do you want me to hear? What do you want me to answer? Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.*”

#### *Dismissal of Catechumens*

*Catechumens* are non-baptized persons who are seeking baptism and entrance into our Catholic community. *Candidates* are baptized persons raised in another Christian faith-tradition who are seeking full communion with our Catholic community. In most parishes today, after the homily at one of the weekend Masses, these brothers and sisters are called forth, prayed over and sent forth to reflect more fully on the readings that were just proclaimed. In the church’s initiation process, this rite is called the *Rite of Dismissal*. Since they cannot yet participate in Holy Communion, they are sent forth to be further nourished by reflecting together on the Word of God. While it is not normative practice to dismiss *baptized candidates* from the liturgy, it is, however a common pastoral practice in parishes. In such cases it is believed that reflection on the Scriptures (with the *Catechumens*) is a necessary element of their formation.

#### *Profession of Faith (Creed)*

Having listened to the Word of God in the readings, the community rises to give public witness to the faith of our baptism. The *Nicene Creed*, which we profess, was composed in the fourth century in the course of two church councils, Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381. These Councils were called to combat heresies concerning the nature of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. The Nicene Creed expresses true doctrine concerning our belief in the three distinct persons in one God. For 2,000 years the Church has protected and defended her identity as *one holy, catholic and apostolic* by living and dying by the words of the Nicene Creed.

For us today, a big danger is that we recite the creed in a mechanical way forgetting the thousands who willingly died rather than deny their faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Also we in the free world may forget our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are still persecuted for their Christian faith. In her book, *The Mass*, Joan McHugh writes: *“The moment we say: We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all that is seen and unseen, we enter into a great current that will last until the end of time. How blessed we are to be able to stand up in church, step into that current, joining millions of Christ’s disciples, past and present, who gratefully live and willingly die, by the words of the Nicene Creed.”* (P. 114)

#### *General Intercessions*

Enlightened and moved by God’s word, all the baptized now share in the priestly intercession of Christ for all humanity. The gathered assembly of believers now prays for the needs of the church, for civil authorities, for those oppressed by any burden and for the local community, especially for those who are sick and have died.

Concerning the power and importance of intercessory prayer, the late Fr. Anthony de Mello S.J. writes: *“It is only at the end of this world that we shall realize how the destinies of persons and nations have been shaped, not so much by the external actions of powerful men and by events that seemed inevitable, but by the quiet, silent, irresistible prayer of persons the world will never know.”* Our concern for others expands our hearts and directs our love outside of ourselves. This prayer gives us the opportunity to bring local and global needs before the throne of God trusting that his response is always in our best interest.

## V

### THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

In the Liturgy of the Word, the wonderful works of God are proclaimed. Our response to that proclamation is one of gratitude, which we offer to God in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The focus of our attention moves from the Ambo to the Altar-Table.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist has three sub-sections.

*The Preparation of the Altar and the Presentation of the Gifts.*

*The Eucharistic Prayer*

*The Communion Rite*

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we ritualize *four actions* that Jesus did at the Last Supper.

- Jesus “*took bread and wine*”. The Presentation of the Gifts corresponds to this action of Christ. The presider takes gifts of bread and wine from representatives of the assembly.
- Jesus “*gave thanks*”. The Eucharistic Prayer is our great prayer of thanksgiving to our heavenly Father.
- Jesus “*broke bread*”. In the “Breaking of Bread”, which occurs prior to Holy Communion, the large host is broken into many parts.
- Jesus “*gave it to them*”. During Holy Communion the assembly receives the bread and wine, which have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we pray that our lives may be *taken, blessed, broken* and made ready to *share* with others. As we receive the Eucharist we pray that our lives may become Eucharist for others.

The purpose of the Preparation of the Altar and the Presentation of the Gifts is to prepare the altar, gifts and all present for the Eucharistic offering, which is about to begin.

#### **The Preparation of the Altar**

In this simple ritual the assembly’s focus is moved from the ambo to the *altar-table* where our Eucharistic Jesus comes to us. “The altar table is at one and the same time both a table of sacrifice and the table of the paschal banquet, a unique *altar* on which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated in mystery until Christ comes; and a *table* at which the Church’s children assemble to give thanks to God and receive the body and blood of Christ.” (*Dedication of a Church and an Altar* ch. 4, #4)

When Martin Luther denied the *sacrificial* aspect of the Mass, the Church took great pains to emphasize it, so much so that she almost lost sight of the *meal* aspect. Since Vatican II, the Church has emphasized both aspects. When the early Christians celebrated Mass, they were aware that Jesus, their *risen brother*, the same Jesus who was the *slain Lamb of God* (Revelation 5:12) who poured out his life for the forgiveness of sin, was in their midst. Also we notice that the very language of the institution narrative (the words of Jesus at the last Supper) is *sacrificial*. They speak about a “body to be broken” and “blood to be poured out.” For Jesus the reality of what was to happen the next day on

Calvary was a part of the meal that he was celebrating with his Apostles. For Jesus, his sacrifice on the cross was an act of total self surrender to the Father. At the Mass we re-link, as it were, ourselves to the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. Saint Paul told his converts in Corinth, “*every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes,*” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The deacon or a lay minister prepares the altar by lighting two candles, if not already lit, they place on the altar a white cloth called a corporal, the Sacramentary (book with the prayers of the Mass) and the sacred vessels.

### **Presentation of the Gifts**

During this ritual, representatives of the assembly bring forward in procession gifts of bread and wine, and the money offering. It is also appropriate for the members of the assembly to bring forward food for the poor (*Introduction to the Mass* #101). This action reminds us of the intimate connection between the Eucharist and our call to share our bread with the poor. Symbols of bread and wine are used not only because Jesus used them but also because they are universal symbols of food and unity. Just as many grapes are pressed to make wine and many grains of wheat are crushed to make bread, many people come as one family to praise God in joyful, loving celebration. The bread is unleavened, not our usual bread but a simple bread, a bread of the poor. “*In this bread we cast our lot with the poor, knowing ourselves – however materially affluent – to be poor people, needy and hungry. Unless we acknowledge our hunger, we have no place at this table. How else can God feed us?*” (Cardinal Bernardin)

### *Mixing of Water and Wine*

The *mixing of a little water with the wine* reflects a table practice in the days of Jesus. Later an incarnational symbolism was attached to the rite. As the priest pours a little water (symbolizing weak humanity) and wine (symbolizing the divinity of Christ) into the chalice, he quietly prays, “*By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*” When the gifts of bread and wine have been prepared the Presider prays blessings over each one. The blessing prayers used speak of the bread and wine as the “*work of our hands*”. Their presence reminds us of the sacredness of human labor and that this labor performed in the name of God is a source of holiness.

At this time the altar and gifts may be *incensed* as a sign of the church’s offering and prayer rising to God. The presider and people are also incensed since they are to unite themselves and their prayers with the gifts of bread and wine, which will become the Body and Blood of Christ during the Eucharistic Prayer. “The incense that is consumed in the fire is a vivid allegory for our surrender to God.” (*The Eucharist, Essence, Form, Celebration*, Johannes H. Emminghaus)

### *The Washing of the Hands*

In the early centuries the washing of the hands may have had a practical function. After receiving gifts of food for the poor, the Presider’s hands were soiled and in need of washing. Today the gesture has a symbolic value in which the Presider asks God to cleanse his heart before he offers the sacrifice of Christ. He quietly prays from Psalm 51, “*Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me of my sin.*”

The Presider invites the assembly to pray with these words: “*Pray my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.*” The word “our” is important. It reminds us that at Mass *all* present are celebrants because of baptism (1 Peter 2:9). We are a celebrating community within which there are different functions or ministries.

The *people's response* to “Pray, brothers and sisters...” is; “*May the Lord accept the sacrifice from your hands to the praise and glory of his name, for our good and for the good of all his Church*”. The response points out the twofold purpose of the Eucharistic sacrifice: the glory of God and the ongoing sanctification of his people.

#### *Prayer over the Gifts*

The *Prayer Over the Gifts* is very similar to the “Pray, brothers and sisters...” It is a prayer of petition that God will accept our gifts. Also it looks forward to their transformation into the body and blood of Christ. The prayer over the gifts concludes the *Preparation of the Altar and Presentation of the Gifts* section of the Mass.

## VI

### EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER

*Now the central summit of the entire celebration begins: namely the Eucharistic Prayer, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. (GIRM # 78).*

During the Eucharistic Prayer, the Body and Blood of Christ are made present by the power of the Holy Spirit and the people of God are joined to Christ in offering his sacrifice to the Father. The people participate in this great prayer and profess their faith in what is happening through the chanting of several acclamations.

#### *The Preface*

The Eucharistic Prayer is introduced with the *preface*, which is a kind of solemn speech. The preface is introduced with a dialogue between priest and people. In the dialogue all present are urged to ‘lift up their hearts and give thanks to the Lord our God for the gift of salvation.’” In the *preface* we thank God the Father, through Jesus in the Spirit for the marvelous gifts of creation, salvation and sanctification. Today the church provides us with over eighty individual prefaces. While all the prefaces have the same basic structure each one reflects a liturgical season, feast day or special occasion.

Because this part of the Mass is basically the same each Sunday there is a real danger that we ‘mentally check out’ and fail to be an active participant. It will take a real effort for us to stay focused on the awesome action that is about to take place. During the Eucharistic Prayer we are summoned to leave behind all of our concerns and to lift up our spirits in contemplation of the great mystery about to be accomplished. In addition the faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood and actively participate in the Eucharistic Prayer by singing or reciting with all their community, three acclamations.

#### *The Holy, Holy, Holy Acclamation*

In the *Sanctus* acclamation (“Holy, Holy”), those present join their voices to that of all creation in giving glory to God, with words inspired by the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:3). In each celebration of the Eucharist, the Church is taken up into the eternal liturgy in which the entire communion of saints, the heavenly powers, and all of creation give praise to the God of the universe.

Speaking of the presence of angels during Mass, St. Brigid writes: “*One day while I was assisting at the Holy Sacrifice, I saw an immense number of holy Angels descend and gather around the altar contemplating the priest. They sang heavenly canticles and ravished my heart; heaven itself seemed to be contemplating the great sacrifice. And yet we poor blind miserable creatures assist at Mass with so little love, relish and respect. Oh! If God would open our eyes what wonders should we not see.*”

#### *Epiclesis*

The Eucharistic Prayer now continues with the “*epiclesis*” a Greek word for “calling down upon”. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains what happens during the *Epiclesis* in this way: *The Epiclesis (“invocation upon”) is the intercession in which the priest begs the Father to send the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, so that the offerings may become the body and blood of Christ and that the faithful, by receiving them, may themselves become a living offering to God. (#1105)* In Eucharistic Prayer II, we find these words:

*“Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy  
so that they may become the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

An early Father of the church, St. John Damascene, writes: *“If anyone wishes to know how the bread is changed into the body of Christ at Mass, I will tell him. The Holy Spirit overshadows the priest and acts on him as he acted on the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the angel Gabriel visited her.”*

#### *The Institution Narrative/Consecration*

The *Institution Narrative* contains the words Jesus used at the last supper over the bread and wine. Concerning this mystery of our faith, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states: *“Since the Middle Ages, the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ has been called “transubstantiation.” This means that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The appearances of bread and wine remain (color, shape, weight, chemical composition), but the underlying reality – that is, the substance – is now the Body and Blood of Christ.”* P. 223

In his sacrifice on the cross, Christ totally poured out his life for us, totally let go of self that we might live and be reconciled to God and each other. Jesus seeks to draw us into his act of total giving so that we might give of ourselves in service to others. If we find it a challenge to believe that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass, we would do well to meditate on the wise words of St. Cyril of Alexandria:

*Do not doubt whether this is true,  
but rather receive the words of our Savior in faith,  
for since he is the truth, he cannot lie. (C.C.C. #1381)*

#### *Memorial Acclamation*

After the words of consecration, a memorial acclamation is said or sung. This is our shout of joy and thanks to Christ, whose memory we keep and who will one day return to take us home. In and through this and the other acclamations, the faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood and actively participate in the Eucharistic Prayer.

#### *Anamnesis*

Anamnesis is a Greek word meaning, “remembering”. But in the context of Jewish and Catholic liturgy *Anamnesis* is a remembering that *makes present today* an event that occurred in the past. While the whole Eucharistic Prayer is in a real sense an anamnesis or a remembering, it especially refers to those words in the Eucharistic Prayer, which say:

*Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation,  
His glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven,  
and ready to greet him when he comes again,  
we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.*

Eucharistic Prayer III

As stated above, the “calling to mind” is not just remembering what Jesus did 2,000 years ago; rather it is “re-actuating”, “a re-presentation before God of the saving deeds that he has accomplished in Christ so that their fullness and power may be effective here and now” (*Introduction to the Mass* #121, CCC #1044). A past event becomes a ‘now event’. In human experience perhaps

the closest we can get to understanding *anamnesis* is when we tell stories about a deceased loved one, he or she in a real sense becomes present to us.

### *Offering*

Following the *Anamnesis* and closely related to it is the prayer of *Offering*. *GIRM* (# 79) tells us that in the prayer of offering, “*the church and in particular the church here and now gathered – offers in the Holy Spirit the spotless Victim to the Father.*” Then the same paragraph of *GIRM* reminds us: “*The church’s intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learns to offer themselves, and so day by day be consummated, through Christ the Mediator, into unity with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all*”.

During this part of the Eucharistic Prayer we make our own the sacrifice of Christ. This is the moment for us to unite our sufferings and trials to those of Christ. Each Eucharistic Prayer expresses the *Offering* prayer in a slightly different way. Eucharistic Prayer II states it in this way:

*In memory of his death and resurrection,  
we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread,  
this saving cup.  
We thank you for counting us worthy  
to stand in your presence and serve you.*

### *Intercessions*

In the Eucharistic Prayer III, this portion of the Eucharistic Prayer is expressed in this way:

*May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ  
be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.  
May he make us an everlasting gift to you  
and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints,  
with Mary, the virgin Mother of God;  
with the apostles, the martyrs,  
(Saint N. – the saint of the day or the patron saint) and all your saints,  
on whose constant intercession we rely for help.*

*Lord, may this sacrifice,  
which has made our peace with you,  
advance the peace and salvation of all the world.  
Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim  
Church on earth;  
your servant, Pope N., our bishop N. and all the bishops,  
with the clergy and the entire people  
your Son has gained for you.  
Father, hear the prayers of the family  
you have gathered here before you.  
In mercy and love unite all your children wherever they may be.*

As we join ourselves to the perfect offering of Christ to the Father we also join ourselves to all of the faithful – both living and dead. We pray that the salvation gained by Jesus be experienced by all. In the Eucharist, earth unites itself with heaven. We join our prayer to the perfect prayer of Jesus. As we do so we remember and recall those who have gone ahead of us – especially Mary and the saints.

We also remember our spiritual leaders here on earth and all the faithful especially those gathered to celebrate this particular Eucharist.

*Doxology*

The word 'doxology' means 'hymn of praise'. During this shout of praise to our triune God, the priest lifts up the chalice and hosts and chants or says:

*Through him, with him, in him  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit  
all glory is given to you Almighty Father  
forever and ever. Amen.*

So the Eucharistic Prayer ends as it begins with a shout of praise and thanks to God. The assembly responds by singing the "Great Amen". It is the most important acclamation of the whole Mass. 'Amen', means, 'so be it'. It is our "yes" to all that has been done and proclaimed. It is our burst of praise to our God who has done such wonderful things for us. The great "Amen" brings the Eucharistic prayer to its completion.

## VII

### THE COMMUNION RITE

The banquet of the Lord is ready. All present now prepare themselves to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Holy Communion at Mass is an expression of our unity with Christ and with all of God's people. It is the culmination of our Eucharistic celebration.

The prayers and rituals during this section of the Mass are intended to prepare us to receive Jesus, our Savior and Lord in Holy Communion.

#### *The Lord's Prayer*

In the Lord's Prayer we, as a community, address God as "Our Father" (our "Papa" as Jesus referred to him). Our relationship is not to be one of fear but one of love. We use Matthew's version 6:9-13 and not Luke's 11:2-4. Matthew's version is considered richer and fuller, containing a larger number of petitions.

Two petitions in the Lord's prayer make this prayer a particularly appropriate one to pray prior to receiving Communion: "*give us our daily bread*" and "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" The "*daily bread*" petition can be linked to the Bread of Life, which we receive in Communion. The reference to forgiveness reminds us of the importance of approaching to the Eucharist with a forgiving heart or at least with a heart that sincerely desires to forgive.

The final petition of the Lord's Prayer is "*deliver us from evil. . .*" This petition is extended and enriched with a beautiful prayer in which the presider asks God to protect us from sin and evil and to grant us his peace "*as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of his kingdom.*" As Christians we are involved in a spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-17), and our enemy is the subtlest of all creatures (Genesis 3:1); hence, we often need to pray deliverance prayers like this one prayed at every Mass.

#### *Sign of Peace*

The biblical concept of peace includes total well-being – a life in harmony with God others, self and all creation. Such peace is a pure gift of God for which we should earnestly pray. It is won for us by the saving work of Our Risen Lord present in the midst of all assembled. It is this hard earned gift of peace that we share when we exchange a sign of peace with those around us. The sign of peace, which we share before the reception of Holy Communion, acknowledges that Christ whom we receive in the Sacrament is already present in our neighbor. This gesture should express our sincere desire to forgive all hurts and to be at peace with all people (*Introduction to the Mass* # 128-9).

#### *Breaking of the Bread*

During this ritual, the priest takes the large host and breaks it into many parts. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, St. Paul beautifully explains for us the meaning of this ritual. He states: "*The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the loaf.*" (10:16-17). The rich diversity of our church is one as it gathers to celebrate our unity in Christ. In an ancient document of our church called *Didache* we find these words: "*As this broken bread, scattered over the mountains, was gathered together in the same manner from the ends of the earth in your kingdom. . .*"

Reflecting upon the ritual action of breaking the bread, Fr. Cantalamesso, a preacher to the papal household says:

*To understand this ritual I must, first of all, “break” myself. . . Lay before God all hardness, all rebellion towards him or towards others, crush my pride, submit and say, “yes”, fully to all that God asks of me. I too must repeat the words: Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God! You don’t want many things from me; you want me and I say “yes”. To be Eucharist like Jesus signifies being totally abandoned to the Father’s will. (Quoted in *The Mass*, p. 226)*

### *Commingling Rite*

During the ‘Breaking of the Bread’ ritual, the priest places a small portion of the host in the chalice to *signify the unity of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the work of salvation. . .* (GIRM #83). When the consecrated elements are mingled with each other, it symbolically expresses that the Body of Christ is not without the Blood of Christ and the Blood of Christ is not without the Body of Christ. Christ is totally present in *both* the bread and wine.

Also, during the “Breaking of the Bread’ ritual, the assembly sings or recites a litany song called *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God). “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us”. In his first letter, Peter reminds us that we “*saved, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as if a spotless, unblemished lamb. (1:18)*

### *Communion*

After the commingling rite, the priest and people take a moment to quietly prepare themselves to receive Holy Communion. One of the prayers the priest can quietly pray is:

*Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in your love and mercy, I eat your body and drink your blood. Let it not bring me condemnation, but health in mind and body.*

### *Invitation to Holy Communion*

Holding the large host above the chalice, the priest says:

*This is the Lamb of God  
who takes away the sins of the world.  
Happy are those who are called to his supper.*

The assembly responds:

*Lord I am not worthy to receive you  
but only say the word and I will  
be healed.*

These are the words used by the Roman Centurion when he asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:8). His faith, humility and confidence are models for all of us waiting to receive Jesus, the Lamb of God in Holy Communion.

In an effort to draw out the deep meaning of the Lord's invitation and the symbolism of the Eucharist, catechist and teacher Marie McIntyre writes:

*When the priest takes the bread and wine into his hands and elevates them for all to see, it is as if Christ is calling out to us and saying;*

*“Here I am present in your midst under forms of life – bread and wine – to remind you that I am your life and you will have life forever if you come to me and learn from me to love the Father as I do.*

*Here I am bread and wine to be shared – eaten – consumed so that I may become part of you, enter into your life and sustain you . . .*

*Here I am as a total gift – as a sign that to be like me, you have to be ready to give yourselves for others. Here I am sharing symbols of life and joy because I want you to live my life and share my joy. . .*

*Here I am as a sign of life freely given, freely shared so that all might come and none be turned away. Here I am for you because I love you.”*

GIRM #56 states, “It is most desirable that the faithful receive the Lord's body and from hosts consecrated at the same Mass. . .” i.e. from the Mass they actually attend. In other words, receiving leftover hosts preserved in the tabernacle should be an exception and not normative.

#### *Proper Disposition for receiving Holy Communion*

When it comes to receiving Holy Communion, we should remember the words of St. Paul, “Whoever therefore eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). With Paul's words in mind, we can say *two extremes* are to be avoided. If we suffer from an overly *scrupulous conscience* we may judge that we are never worthy of Holy Communion – unless we have received the Sacrament of Reconciliation the day before. Such a scrupulous conscience makes God a hard taskmaster who is never satisfied with us. On the other hand, we may approach the table of the Lord when we shouldn't e.g., we carry a hardened heart within us with absolutely no desire to forgive a hurt and no desire to pray for grace of forgiveness. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* reminds us to prepare conscientiously for the moment of Holy Communion. “We should be in the state of grace, and if we are conscious of grave or serious sin, we must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion. We are also expected to fast from food and drink for at least one hour prior to the reception of Holy Communion (p. 222). Even though none of us are worthy to receive our divine Lord in Holy Communion, (“Lord I am not worthy. . .”) all of us must make every effort to be the least unworthy that we can be.

#### *The Communion Procession*

After the priest, deacons and extraordinary ministers of the bread and cup receive the Body and Blood of Christ and go to their communion stations, members of the assembly process to stations closest to them to receive our divine Lord. Our church tells us that it is desirable that all who process forward to receive Holy Communion receive both the body *and* the blood of Christ. By doing so the “sign of the Eucharistic banquet” is more clearly evident. (GIRM # 281) The one offering the host and the cup says “Body of Christ”, “Blood of Christ”. The one receiving makes a slight bow and says ‘Amen’. The bow is an act of reverence for our divine Lord. The ‘Amen’ is a profession of faith. It means ‘yes’, ‘I believe’ that Jesus is fully present in the bread and cup offered.

### *In the Hand or on the Tongue?*

Catholics have the option of receiving Communion in the hand or on the tongue. Many Catholics, who were raised in the pre-Vatican II church, think that receiving Holy Communion in the hand is a Vatican II invention. It is not. Though we do not know for certain, we can safely assume that the Apostles at the last Supper received the bread in their hands from Jesus. We also know for the first millennium, Catholic Christians usually received Communion in their hand. St. Cyril of Jerusalem describes the fourth century procedure in this way:

*When you approach, do not go stretching out your hands or having your fingers spread out, but make the left hand into a throne for the right one, which shall receive the King, and then cup your open hand and take the Body of Christ, reciting the Amen*

During the time of communion distribution an appropriate hymn is sung. When all present participate in this song it expresses the spiritual union of the communicants. When we return to our pew after receiving Holy Communion, we should continue to participate in the communion song rather than engage in our own private prayer. There is an opportunity for that after the communion song has been completed. This period of silence is important. It gives all present an opportunity for interior prayer and contemplation of the gift received.

### *The Fruits and Implications of Receiving Holy Communion*

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1391-1401) mentions several fruits that come to us as a result of receiving Jesus in Holy Communion.

*“Holy communion augments our union with Christ”* (#1391)

The principal fruit of receiving Holy Communion is that it unites us more intimately with Christ. In his discourse on the Bread of Life, Jesus says: *“He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him”*. (6:56) Paul sees this *abiding* in terms of *putting* on Christ, identifying with Christ, developing within ourselves Christ’s outlook, attitudes and his commitment to the Father. Unless we abide in Christ, all our efforts are in vain (John 15:4). Hence, receiving Holy Communion means a willingness to do all we can to have that mind in us that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).

*“Holy Communion Separates us From Sin”* (#1393)

The Catechism states: *“The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is “given for us”, the blood we drink is “shed for the many for the forgiveness of sins.” For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins”* This teaching will come as a surprise to many Catholics who associate the forgiveness of sins solely with the Sacrament of Penance. But upon reflection we can easily see that if the Eucharist helps to increase our love for Christ, it must at the same time withdraw us from the darkness of selfishness, which is a sin. This is not to say that the Eucharist replaces our need for the Sacrament of Penance. It doesn’t. Rather it complements the work of sacramental reconciliation.

*“Communion renews, strengthens and deepens our incorporation into the church, already achieved by Baptism”*. (#1396)

During his last discourse, Jesus prayed to his Father “*May they all be one*” (John 17:20) and he urged his disciples “*to love one another as I have loved you*” (John 13:34). Through our participation in the Eucharist, we become bound ever more closely with the church. As an ancient axiom states, ‘the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church.’

“*The Eucharist commits us to the poor*” (#1397)

The *Catechism* states: “To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren. Then the *Catechism* goes on to quote challenging words from a homily of St. John Chrysostom, an Early Church Father:

*“You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother,... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food with someone judged worthy to take part in this meal... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become more merciful.”*

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reminds them that in sharing the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, they were also called to care for the poorest members of the community (11:17-34).

“*The Eucharist is our pledge of the glory to come*” (#1042-1405).

At the Last Supper, Jesus pointed to this fruit of receiving Holy Communion when he said: “*I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in my Father’s Kingdom.*” Luke 22:18. When ever we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist our church remembers this promise of our Lord turning her gaze towards him who is to come (CCC #1403).

When we receive Communion we are publicly stating our willingness to stand with Jesus in his ongoing battle against all forms of evil and suffering in our world. The Calvary dimension of Eucharist becomes real when we confront with love and courage the daily crosses and persecutions of life, such as difficult family and work situations, poor health, the unjust structures of society that oppress and keep in bondage the poor. A central part of being a sincere Eucharistic person is our willingness to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned (Matthew 25: 31-46).

After the distribution of Holy Communion is finished, the vessels are put aside and the priest is seated. Then follows a time of *quiet meditation*. We spend a few moments allowing the meaning of Holy Communion to sink deep into our hearts. We may choose either to sit quietly in the presence of our Beloved, or we may choose to speak to him about the deepest concerns of our hearts. A medieval monk stated: “*While we rest in him, he works in us.*”

Communion is a great moment of intimacy with the Lord and the members of his body. We come forward, not as isolated individuals, but as brothers and sisters in Christ. We come forward, not in a sluggish way, but with reverence and love for him who is the life of the world. Our “Amen” to the minister’s words, “The body of Christ,” will mean:

*I believe, Jesus, you are the bread of life.*

*I believe you are the power that can transform my life.*

*I believe, Jesus, that these people are my brothers and sisters and part of the one Body of Christ.*

*I accept, Jesus, the challenge to become your bread for others and to build up your body in the world.*

*Sending forth Eucharistic Ministers to the Sick*

At the beginning of this book we quoted a description of the Eucharistic celebration in the early church, which stated that the Eucharist was given to representatives of the community to be shared with the sick. In many parishes today, the presider, after Communion, sends forth lay ministers who will take Eucharist to the sick and homebound.

*Prayer After Communion*

The celebrant now prays that the fruits of the mysteries which we have celebrated may take effect in our daily lives, especially the fruit of keeping one's eyes on Jesus as we live and love in the world.

## VII

### CONCLUDING RITE

The Concluding Rite of the Mass consists of a *blessing* and a *sending forth* into the world. As the presider raises his hand in blessing, the people sign themselves in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit just as they did at the beginning of the Mass.

“To bless God means to praise God for his goodness and wonderful gifts. To bless a person is an action requesting that God continue to extend his generosity. In this final blessing the priest prays that the greatest of all benefits may be given in abundant measure to those who have shared in God’s word and Christ’s Body. Such an action upon departure is found in the New Testament when Christ, before being taken up into heaven “raised his hands, and blessed the Apostles Lk 24:50” (*The Mystery of Faith*, page 131)

The presider then dismisses the assembly with these or similar words: “*Go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord and each other.*” The dismissal is reminiscent of Christ’s Great Commission to his Apostles, “*Go forth into the whole world and teach all nations.*” Having received the gift of life, we are now sent forth to share that life with our brothers and sisters in the world. At the beginning of the Mass we were told, “*Let us pray.*” Now we are instructed, “*Let us act;*” let us act as people touched by the Lord. We are sent forth to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We are to be the bread of life for others. We are to share the Good News of God’s love for all with others. We are sent forth to continue the saving work of Jesus in human history. Commenting on the work of God in human history, liturgist Fr. Mark Searle writes: *This work may be best summed up in the word “reconciliation”. The work of God is to reconcile the world to himself by overcoming whatever is not of God. God is always seeking to heal divisions where they exist between nations, religions, families and individuals. God is always seeking to bring justice where injustice rules, giving hope to the hopeless, light to the confused, peace to those who are at odds, and support to those whom hurt and fear have turned in upon themselves. In short, the work of God is his victory over sin and the establishment of his rule and Kingdom when evil would enslave us.*

## IX

### CONNECTING LITURGY AND LIFE

*One cannot be truly engaged in the liturgy if they are not engaged in life.  
One supports the other.*

Clara Dina Hinojosa

It would seem that many people who attend Mass on Sunday see little connection between what happens in church and what happens in their homes, neighborhoods, and work places. For many people, their “Thanks be to God” at the end of Mass may literally mean, “Thank God, the Sunday obligation is taken care of; now let’s get back to business as usual.” Too few people are aware that the time spent in the world can be a means of personal sanctification just like the time spent in personal and communal prayer. Such separation of worship and life, of the sacred and the secular, is a perennial danger in Christian spirituality. It is too easy for us to lose sight of the beautiful fact that the Jesus who leads us in worship on Sunday morning is also at work in the kitchens and offices of life, seeking to build there “*a kingdom of truth, justice, love and peace.*” (Preface, Feast of Christ the King).

At Mass we *celebrate* the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, i.e., his dying and rising, his *passage* back to the Father. But it is in our homes, neighborhoods, shopping centers, work places, etc. that we *live* the Paschal Mystery. It is in these places that we literally enter into (or fail to enter into) the death and resurrection of Jesus. We enter into and share in the dying of Jesus when we are called to die to ourselves and our desires, when we experience rejection or misunderstanding, when we are gossiped about and treated unjustly, when we struggle with suffering, sickness, old age, evil and death. We enter into the dying of Jesus when we struggle with painful relationships at home, at work and at play. We enter into the victory and resurrection of Jesus every time we make a decision to love, to give and receive forgiveness, to do what we can to change what can be changed and accept patiently what cannot be changed. We enter into and share in the victory and resurrection of Jesus every time we let go of bitterness, jealousies, small-mindedness, and all the things that block us from communicating and experiencing the oneness of spirit that we pray for at Mass. All of the above examples and many others give us multiple opportunities to daily die and rise with Christ.

The authenticity and integrity of our weekly celebration of the Paschal Mystery will be in direct relationship to our efforts to live the Paschal Mystery in the hustle and bustle of daily life. If our daily lives reflect little of the dying and rising of Christ, then we can be sure that our Sunday celebration of those events, however devoutly attended or beautifully celebrated, will be of little interest to our Lord. In fact, he may well say of us, “*This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.*” (Mark 7:6) “Full, conscious and active participation” doesn’t just refer to liturgy but to *all* of life. “Full, conscious and active participation” refers to our relationships at home, work and at recreation. It refers to our response to God who is present and active in every aspect of our lives. “Full, conscious and active participation” means that we give ourselves totally to whatever we are doing at any particular moment.

When we come to Mass on Sunday, we bring with us to the altar of God our efforts, however fragile, to live the Paschal Mystery.

During the *Act of Penitence* we give the Lord our failures, and we ask for his mercy and healing.

During the *Liturgy of the Word* we look at our efforts to live the dying and rising of Christ and view them in the light of God’s Word.

At the *Presentation of the Gifts* we prepare the gifts of bread and wine and we prepare our minds and hearts to enter into Eucharistic Prayer and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

During the *Eucharistic Prayer* we become mystically united in the perfect thanksgiving and self-offering of Jesus to his Father and our Father, praying that our efforts to give thanks and to surrender ourselves to him may be a little more generous.

During the *Communion Rite* we receive food and drink from heaven, divine nourishment for life's journey. By our active participation in the communion rite, we give expression to the fact that we are members of the Body of Christ and want to be bread for our brothers and sisters as they journey through life.

Finally, at the *Concluding Rite*, we are once again sent forth into the marketplace to make a fresh effort to live the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

The time we spend in personal and communal prayer is a time to be recharged. This time is a call to be immersed in Christ so that we may re-enter even more intensely the arena of human activity. This time of union with Christ strengthens us as co-workers with the Lord who is molding us as he fashions "*a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide and where blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart,*" (*The Church in the Modern World* #39). It is not a time of escape but a time of empowerment.

Much of what I have been saying about linking liturgy and life is beautifully summarized in these words of the late Cardinal Bernardin in his *Pastoral Letter on the Liturgy* to the people of Chicago. He writes:

*The liturgy is not an extra something nice that may give us good feelings. It is our life, our very spirit. It is the source of our identity and renewal as a Church*

*When we let the liturgy shape us – from the ashes of Lent and the waters of baptism to the broken bread and poured out cup at every Sunday's Mass – then we shall find what it is "to put on Christ."*

*Yet liturgy is also a humble reality, and participation in liturgy does not exhaust our duties as Christians. We shall be judged for attending to justice and giving witness to the truth, for hungry people fed and prisoners visited. Liturgy itself does not do these things. Yet good liturgy makes us a people whose hearts are set on such deeds. Liturgy is our communion, our strength, our nourishment, our song, our peace, our reminder, our promise. This singular meeting with the Lord Jesus leads us to make all the events and circumstances of our lives occasions for meeting Him. Liturgy is for me the bedrock of all my prayer and the measure of all my deeds.*

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## FOR OUR MEDITATION

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### COMMUNION

*Com-union!*  
*The word rings out the Christian ideal.*  
*A Church at one*  
*a world at one*  
*man one with man*  
*man one with his God*  
*man, through the Spirit,*  
*one with the Father*  
*one with the Son.*

*In the Mass*  
*is this Communion*  
*celebrated*  
*signified*  
*effected.*

*Therefore is the Mass*  
*both summit and source*  
*of all Christian activity.*

*For this, the Mass, was*  
*the world created*  
*the Church founded*  
*the Word made flesh.*

*So that*  
*at the heart of the Church*  
*at the heart of the world*  
*at the heart of the Divine Plan*  
*is the MASS.*

Fr. Sean Swayne

### JESUS, JOY OF LOVING HEARTS

*O Jesus, joy of loving hearts,*  
*the fount of life and my true light,*  
*we seek the peace your love imparts*  
*and stand rejoicing in your sight.*

*We taste in you my living bread*  
*and long to feast upon you still.*  
*We drink of you my fountain head,*  
*my thirsting soul to quench and fill.*

*For you my thirsting spirit years,*  
*where'er our changing lot is cast;*  
*glad when your presence we discern,*  
*blest when our faith can hold you fast.*

*O Jesus ever with us stay;*  
*make all our moments calm and bright.*  
*O chase the night of sin away;*  
*shed o'er the world your holy light.*

Attributed to St. Bernard of Clairveaux