

Let Us Pray: *Reflections on the Meaning of Our Catholic Liturgy*

Part I: Liturgy at the Heart of Catholic Life (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

Some of our most treasured memories as Catholics are family celebrations of Baptisms, First Communion, Confirmations, Weddings, and Funerals. These significant occasions mark the special moments in a family's history while at the same time connecting us with our faith. These occasions leave a lasting impression on us and in many ways shape and form us in our Catholic identity. Our Catholic rituals are often the first things people note about Catholics. Of all our Catholic rituals, nothing is as important to us as our celebration of the Mass.

While we might easily acknowledge how important liturgy is for us, at the same time we may scratch our heads sometimes wondering what all these prayers and rituals mean. Do we really need them? How can we learn to pray them with a better understanding of what we are doing? How do we help our children or our unpracticing Catholic neighbors appreciate the value of our communal worship? Are these ancient rituals still relevant for our contemporary times?

In the coming weeks we will take a closer look at the liturgy, especially the Mass. We hope you might use these brief essays as a springboard for discussion at home or with your neighbors and as a stimulus for your own spiritual reflection.

What do we mean by the word "Liturgy"?

Liturgy is the official worship of the Church whose texts and rituals have been approved by the Holy See and used universally. The Mass, the Sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, Funeral Rites, special blessings, receiving ashes at the beginning of Lent, all fit under the definition of Liturgy. Other popular prayers and practices, such as the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, grace before meals, a novena, lighting a candle, etc. are considered devotional prayers and are not necessarily used in the same way universally. These popular devotions are often culturally influenced and become part of a local people's piety - for example, devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe or Our Lady of Czestochowa.

What is unique about the Mass and the Sacraments?

Sometimes we hear people say, "I don't have to go to church to pray." That's true. But when we gather to celebrate the Mass or the Sacraments we're not just coming to church to say our prayers. More importantly, when we celebrate the Mass or the Sacraments, God is at work redeeming us. It is Christ who acts in the sacraments. So while we can stay home and pray, we will miss the opportunity to encounter the living Christ and be transformed by him in the liturgy. When an individual is brought to the church for Baptism, that individual does not leave the Church in the same way as he/she entered the church. The baptized individual has been changed, transformed by God into a new creature, a son or daughter of God. When a man and woman come to church to exchange their vows, they leave the church changed, united in the bond of marriage. In a similar way, we don't leave Mass in the same way as we came. God is at work in the Mass, applying to us the fruit of Christ's saving passion, death and resurrection. He sends us forth to be disciples of the mystery we have just celebrated.

Who are the celebrants of the liturgy?

By virtue of our Baptism, we are all celebrants of the liturgy. "It is the whole community, the Body of Christ, united with its Head that celebrates." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1140) There are no passive spectators at the liturgy. The ordained priest exercises a unique role in the liturgy for he serves us "*in persona Christi*", i.e. in the person of Christ. But we are all called to actively and consciously participate in the liturgy so that our worship is truly the one prayer of the whole body of Christ. We have an obligation to participate fully and consciously by engaging ourselves in offering the prayers of the Mass, listening attentively to the scriptures and singing with the entire assembly. Thus it is inappropriate to say the rosary during Mass or pray our own devotions. The Mass is not a backdrop for our private devotions; it is intended to be the united prayer of all the baptized gathered in the name of Jesus.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ How has the Church's liturgy influenced the life of my family?
- ⇒ To what degree do I participate fully and consciously in the liturgy?
- ⇒ How would I explain to a friend or neighbor why the liturgy is important in my life?



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Part II: Preparing for Worship (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

Long before the community gathers to worship, preparations are made behind the scene. Sacristans prepare the vessels we need at Mass and set out sufficient bread and wine to be consecrated. Lectors practice their assigned scripture readings and musicians plan and rehearse the music. Preachers spend hours in preparing their homily. The congregation too is expected to prepare for worship. Ideally we pre-read the scriptures for Sunday Mass at least a day or two before. Reflecting upon the Word of God prior to coming to Mass helps us to hear the message of the scriptures more clearly. Arriving in time for Mass is good preparation for worship because we need some time to just be still and let go of the many distractions we may bring with us from our busy lives. A good way to look at how we participate in the Mass is to think of our leaving home as the beginning of our procession to the altar. On the way to church we can begin to focus our prayer by asking ourselves, "For what will I give thanks today?" We should consider, "What will I put into the bread and wine today of myself which will be placed on the altar to be united with Christ's sacrifice?"

How is the Order of Worship Governed?

One of the things we take pride in as Catholics is that our liturgy is universal. That means that the same order of worship we experience at Sunday Mass is the same order of worship world-wide. The priest celebrant may legitimately choose from several options provided in the rites, e.g. which Eucharistic Prayer to use, or he may insert his own words when the rubrics state: "*in these or similar words.*" There are also some minor cultural differences from place to place, but the basic format and order of the Liturgy is the same everywhere. To help churches around the world celebrate the Catholic liturgy, the Church provides *rubrics* or liturgical laws that are intended to ensure a dignified and prayerful celebration. These *rubrics* are found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, in the texts of the *Roman Missal*, the *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass*, the *Directory for Masses with Children*, the instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* and a number of other documents that are typically issued from time to time from the Roman Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments or from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

All of this documentation can be difficult to manage, but not meant to take a life of its own to the point where we lose the very spirit and purpose of the liturgy. Not all rubrics bear the same weight. For example, liturgical law that governs what constitutes valid matter for the bread and wine is far more significant than the number of candles we place around the altar when the diocesan bishop celebrates Mass. Care must be taken so that a sure foundation is set for a prayerful and authentic liturgy. The Mass, however, is more than its rubrics. The rubrics serve the Mass when participants infuse them with intention, devotion, and meaning. The liturgical books do not and cannot foresee everything that happens at Mass. Thus, for instance, there are no rubrics about where the servers are seated, or how the communion ministers receive chalice or ciborium and process to their stations. The rubrics would be hard pressed to spell out what constitutes a good rhythm and pace in recitation of prayers and the natural flow between music and ritual action. And yet attention to this artistry can make a huge difference on the overall prayerfulness of our worship. The architecture or floor plan of a church also has a bearing on how we celebrate the liturgy. There are local decisions that need to be made in the overall spirit and intention of the liturgy. But they are important decisions because if the details are not attended to, we can inadvertently find ourselves at worship with too many distractions or practices which take away from the overall good order and prayerful spirit.

Who are the subjects of liturgical law?

The answer quite simply is all of us. Remember that we are all celebrants of the liturgy (see *Catechism* #1140) and so we all have a responsibility to participate in such a manner that it is clear that we are one body, offering one solemn prayer to God with and through Christ. Being present for the whole Mass, making the responses, singing hymns and the parts of the Mass, making the appropriate gestures, such as making the sign of the cross or bowing before we receive communion are rubrics that apply to the whole congregation.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ How do I prepare myself for a fruitful celebration of Mass?
- ⇒ Am I faithful to the rubrics by making the proper responses and gestures thoughtfully, gracefully and prayerfully?



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Part III: Gathering for Worship (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

Gathering as One

Our Catholic prayer tradition is very rich and includes many styles of prayer. But the liturgy is unique because when we come to worship we are not just coming together at the same time and place to do our own prayers and pray for our own needs. The liturgy is the prayer of the whole Church. When we worship God together we exercise the priestly character we received at Baptism. There is only one sacrifice and it is Christ's and we are joined to him in making one act of worship to God.

Welcoming One Another

When we arrive at the church, we ought to welcome one another with a smile and a friendly greeting. After all, we are about to do something very important together as the one body of Christ. You never know when by a smile and simple gesture of welcome you might change the attitude of someone who came reluctantly but now begins to feel he/she belongs and wants to worship. We are indeed brothers and sisters in the Lord. We will give ritual expression to our solidarity in Christ when later in the Mass we extend a greeting of peace to those around us and thus partake of the one Bread and one Chalice.

We come to Mass from many different directions, often distracted by what we left at home or what we have to do later in the day. To pull us together so that we can worship with one mind and heart, we begin Mass with a gathering hymn. Even if we don't consider ourselves a good singer, God doesn't mind. After all, He gave us the voice we have to worship Him. While we sing the hymn, the priest and the other liturgical ministers, led by the powerful sign of the cross, process to the altar. Pay special attention to the words of the hymn. Remember it is our first prayer, a sung prayer, not just "filler music" to accompany the priest walking up the aisle.

When the priest approaches the altar, he makes a profound bow and then together with the deacon reverently kisses the altar. On the day of the altar's dedication the Bishop anointed the altar with sacred Chrism oil to be the sign of Christ in our midst. Around this holy altar God's people gather to enjoy a foretaste of that heavenly table that awaits God's children.

Greeting and Penitential Act

Christians live under the sign of the cross and so we begin our communal worship by marking our bodies with this sign of our salvation. The priest greets us: "The Lord be with you". In this greeting (or similar greetings) we are addressed as one family in Christ. We remember Christ's promise that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is truly present. Recognizing that none of us come to the altar without having been marred by sin in our lives, we take a moment to open our hearts to God's mercy so that despite our unworthiness he may grant us a place at his table. There are three different forms of the Penitential Act. Sometimes, especially during the Easter Season, a rite of blessing and sprinkling of water may take the place of the Penitential Act as a reminder of our Baptism. At Masses where a special rite precedes the Mass, for instance at a wedding or one of the rituals of the catechuminate, the Penitential Act is omitted and we move immediately to the Gloria or Opening Prayer.

Gloria and Opening Prayer (Collect)

The Gloria is a hymn of praise that captures the reason we've come together on the Lord's Day. This ancient hymn raises our voices to God in praise of his glory and in thanksgiving for his salvation and enduring love. We refrain from singing the Glory to God during Advent and Lent and at most weekday Masses.

Finally, we come to the Opening Prayer, which the Church formally calls "the Collect" (emphasis on first syllable, pronounced kol•ekt). The Church calls this the "Collect" prayer because it's intended to collect all of our silent prayers. That's why the priest invites us into a moment in silence before offering the prayer so we can silently insert our personal prayer into the communal prayer that he is about to offer.

Everything we have done and prayed to this point, from the procession to the altar to our robust "Amen" that concludes the Collect, constitutes "The Introductory Rites". These Introductory Rites are intended to draw us into solidarity with one another as the body of Christ and to prepare our hearts to listen more attentively, to focus more keenly, and to participate more freely. You can see then why it's important not to come late for Mass and miss this gathering ritual.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ Do you feel welcomed when you arrive at church? How can you extend a welcome to others when they come to Mass (especially new faces)?
- ⇒ How can you tell the difference from a congregation that remains passive at worship from a congregation that puts its heart and soul into worship? Where do you stand?



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Part IV: The Liturgy of the Word (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

God Speaks to His People

In the Liturgy of the Word, God speaks to his people. We believe that when the Sacred Scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgy, Christ is really and truly present (Introduction to the Lectionary #4). The signs of reverence that surround the Gospel proclamation, such as a standing posture, a procession to the ambo (pulpit), reserving the reading of the Gospel to a priest or deacon, singing an “alleluia” chant, the use of candles and incense, and kissing the book after the Gospel is read – are signs which acknowledge the real presence of the Lord who speaks to us through the scriptures.

Origins of the Liturgy of the Word

The first Christian community incorporated into their Eucharistic gatherings a liturgy of the word similar to what they had experienced in the synagogue where Jews listened to Old Testament passages and sang Psalms and Canticles. Before the Gospels were in written form, Christians listened to firsthand accounts from the apostles and early disciples. They listened to the letters of Paul and other missionary disciples and saved the most significant of these letters only to be incorporated later into the New Testament. The oral tradition was in place years before the canon of scripture was finalized.

We say that the Word of God is living and active because of the working of the Holy Spirit. “The working of the Holy Spirit is needed if the word of God is to make what we hear outwardly have its effect inwardly. Because of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and support, the word of God becomes the foundation of the liturgical celebration and the rule and support of all our life.” (Introduction to the Lectionary, #9)

The Scriptures for Use at Liturgy

The selection of scripture passages for the liturgy is found in the book called the “lectionary”. The Sunday readings follow a three year cycle. Each year focuses on either the Gospel of Matthew, Mark or Luke. Special Feasts and the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter draw from a wider selection of scripture passages, including selections from John, that are related to the feast or season. In laying out the design of the lectionary, scripture scholars first chose the Gospel and then an Old Testament reading that related to the Gospel. During the Easter Season the first reading is always taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading during Ordinary Time is ordinarily a semicontinuous reading from a Letter of an Apostle or the Book of Revelation. Readings for special feasts and seasons were selected to harmonize more closely with the occasion. (You can find the daily scripture readings at www.usccb.org/bible/readings/)The three year cycle of the Lectionary has been one of the most beneficial gifts of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Prior to the Council we used a one year lectionary and so the congregation heard the same scriptures every year. Now we have the advantage of hearing much more of the bible.

The chants that follow the first reading are taken primarily from the psalms. While there is an appointed psalm for each Sunday, the Lectionary also allows for a seasonal selection when learning a new psalm each week would be difficult for a congregation. The psalm is ordinarily led from the ambo because it is another form of scriptural proclamation. It is edifying to recall that Jesus frequently prayed the same Psalms we sing and place on our lips today.

Following our hearing of the scriptures, the homily helps us to grasp the meaning of what we just heard and bridge that hearing to our daily lives and the call to take God’s Word to others. After a brief period of silence to allow God’s Word to sink more deeply into our hearts, we stand to recite the Creed. It is permissible to use either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles’ Creed at Mass. Although the Creed uses very sophisticated theological language, it stands as a unifying rallying ritual. Reciting the Creed together is a symbolic expression of our solidarity as Catholics in what we believe and what we stand for.

The Universal Prayer (General Intercessions or Prayers of the Faithful) concludes the Liturgy of the Word. Moved by the scriptures and aware of needs close to home and around the world we intercede before the throne of grace on behalf of all. The Universal Prayer is an example of how we exercise our baptismal priesthood. We have a responsibility by virtue of our Baptism to remember larger concerns and all those who need the prayer of the Church.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ How can I prepare at home to hear and grasp the meaning of the scriptures that will be proclaimed at Mass?
- ⇒ After Sunday Mass, write down in a notepad or journal what you heard God say to you in the scriptures. Do the same each week. After a few months, review and see if there are any patterns that emerge.



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Part V: Preparation of the Gifts (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

Having listened to the scriptures and homily and having recited the Creed and prayed the Universal Prayer, we now move into the Preparation of the Gifts. We call this second part of the Mass, The Liturgy of the Eucharist, which begins with receiving the people's gifts and preparing the altar for the sacrifice of the Mass.

We've all seen the elements of bread and wine at the back of the church before Mass. These gifts are brought to the altar along with our monetary offerings intended to support the mission of the parish and our outreach to the needy. The significance of this simple ritual procession of gifts is often overlooked. In this ritual we are reminded that all the baptized are called to participate in this sacrifice not as passive spectators but as celebrants of the Mass. Listen carefully to what we are told in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal:

"In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people whom God has made his own, a royal priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves. They should, moreover, endeavor to make this clear by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration." (#95)

Learning to offer ourselves. The key words in the above quote are "that they may learn to offer themselves." What this means practically is that when we enter the church and see the gifts of bread and wine waiting to be carried forward, we are to consciously and intentionally place ourselves into the bread and wine. These simple gifts represent our lives. When they are carried to the altar we should see in this action our lives being presented to Christ who promises to transform us through his Eucharistic sacrifice. This means that there are never two Masses alike because at each Mass the faithful are bringing their own unique experiences and joining their lives to Christ as he offers himself to the Father. This truth is conveyed when the priest says, "Pray, brothers and sisters that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." When the priest says, "my sacrifice", he is speaking in the name of Jesus in whose sacrifice we are about to share.

The Transformation of all creation. Pope Benedict XVI offered an inspiring explanation for what happens when the bread and wine, elements of creation and symbols of our lives, are presented to Christ in the person of the priest and placed on the altar:

"This humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God's eyes. The authentic meaning of this gesture can be clearly expressed without the need for undue emphasis or complexity. It enables us to appreciate how God invites us to participate in bringing to fulfillment his handiwork, and in so doing, gives human labor its authentic meaning, since, through the celebration of the Eucharist, it is united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. (*Sacramentum Caritatis*)

Unleavened Bread. The bread that we use in the Latin Rite is unleavened bread. The unleavened bread reminds us of the Passover at which faithful Jews celebrate their deliverance and covenant with God with unleavened bread. The use of unleavened bread recalls the sojourn of the Israelites through the desert. Escaping the threat of enemies there was no time to wait for the bread to rise. They were on the move. We too are on the move as a pilgrim people headed for the promised land of heaven. Our gift of unleavened bread reminds us that we are on our way home to God.

On more solemn occasions the gifts of bread and wine are incensed along with the priest and the entire congregation, once again making a connection between the gifts on the table and the people who offer themselves with these gifts.

The priest then washes his hands at the side of the altar, a symbolic act that expresses the desire for interior purification. This is immediately followed by the invitation to pray that our sacrifice will be acceptable to God not only for ourselves but to the glory of his name and for the good of his church.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ What does it mean to you when the General Instruction tells us to: "Offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves"?
- ⇒ Realizing the significance of placing ourselves into the bread and wine that are placed on the altar, how can you use this insight in responding to someone who says: "I can stay home and pray"?



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Part VI: The Eucharistic Prayer (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

Once the altar has been prepared and the Prayer over the Offerings has been said, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins. The significance of this next movement is described so well by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, that it's best we listen to the official text:

"Now the center and high point of the entire celebration begins, namely, the Eucharistic Prayer itself, that is the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest calls upon the people to lift up their hearts toward the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving; he associates the people with himself in the Prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the meaning of this Prayer is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice. The Eucharistic Prayer requires that everybody listens to it with reverence and in silence." (#78)

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with the Preface dialogue between the priest and the congregation. The celebrant encourages us: "Lift up your hearts." "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." The dialogue clearly indicates that the Eucharistic Prayer is the prayer of the whole congregation. We have gathered as a priestly people to join Christ in the offering of his sacrifice to the Father. This preface dialogue is one of the oldest elements of the Roman liturgy (3rd-4th century) and leads into one of many available Prefaces which tells us why the community gives thanks to God on this occasion or it may reflect the liturgical season or festivity of the day.

Holy, Holy.....the Sanctus

The Preface concludes with singing the *Holy, Holy*, a text inspired by the vision of Isaiah 6:2-3. It is intended to be a hymn not only sung by the whole congregation but by the chorus of angels and saints, who we believe are also present with us as we surround the altar. What is implied in this image is that we already have one foot in heaven, anticipating that great heavenly banquet at the end of time.

Eucharistic Prayer Texts

In the first fifteen centuries there were many different compositions of the Eucharistic Prayer. But the Roman Missal of 1570 settled on only one Eucharistic Prayer which we now refer to as Eucharistic Prayer I. It was decided in the liturgical reforms of Vatican II to return to an earlier tradition of having several options for the Eucharistic Prayer. Today we are fortunate to have ten Eucharistic Prayers from which to choose, plus an additional set of Eucharistic Prayers composed specifically for Masses with children. While each of the Eucharistic Prayers has its own distinctive flavor and emphasis, they all contain the elements that are essential for the Liturgy of the Eucharist:

Praise and thanksgiving – found throughout the Eucharistic Prayer but especially in the Preface and Holy, Holy.

The epiclesis or the invoking of the Holy Spirit – with hands extended over the bread and chalice the Church implores the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon the gifts we've brought to the altar so that they might become the body and blood of Christ and that the sacrificial Victim we receive in Communion may be for the salvation of those who partake of the sacrifice.

Institution Narrative or Consecration - by the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the words of Jesus giving himself to us, the gifts of bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ so that we may enter most profoundly into his Paschal Mystery by eating and drinking at his table as he commanded us to do.

The anamnesis or the memorial – by remembering the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, his Paschal Mystery is made present to us here and now so that we may receive the fruits of his saving act.

The oblation or offering – the Church gathered here and now offers the unblemished sacrificial Victim to the Father. All the faithful are expected to offer their very selves together with Christ in this holy oblation.

Intercessions – we include at the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer our plea for unity and peace, remembering our Pope and Bishop, and praying for those who suffer and those who have died. We pray that we may share an inheritance with the saints.

Concluding Doxology – in this act the glorification of God is proclaimed and brings the entire Eucharistic prayer to a close. With the chalice and host or the ciborium (*communion bowl*) in his hands the priest sings the doxology by which we respond "Amen!" We refer to this amen as the Great Amen because it is our assent, our "Yes", to the entire Eucharistic Prayer. It's like signing on the dotted line, owning what we have just done. Of all our prayers at Mass this "Amen" ought to be the strongest prayer we make at Mass.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ What does it mean to you when you hear the words, "Lift up your hearts"?
- ⇒ How is what we do at Mass, especially during the Eucharistic Prayer, radically different from saying our private prayers at home?



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Part VII: The Communion Rite (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer appears to have entered the order of Mass in the 4th century. With its themes of daily bread, forgiveness, and mutual peace, this prayer was thought to be an ideal preparation for receiving Holy Communion. The prayer that immediately follows the Our Father is called the *embolism*. It is simply an expansion of the Lord's Prayer focusing on our need to be delivered from evil and distress and to live in hope awaiting the second coming of Christ. The congregation responds with the doxology: "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever."

The Rite of Peace

There is evidence of a Rite of Peace or Kiss of Peace as early as the 5th century. At one point in history it was placed at the end of the Universal Prayer (Intercessions) as a way of saying, "Before you come to offer your gift, be at peace with your brothers and sisters." The current placement of the Rite of Peace is intended to be a sign of our willingness to live in the peace and unity which our reception of Communion commits us to.

Lamb of God

As we sing the "Lamb of God" during the breaking of the bread, we recall St. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians when he said, "Because the Bread is one, all who eat it form one body" (*1 Cor 10:17*). In the early Church this symbolic gesture of breaking the bread was so highly regarded that the term, "Breaking of the Bread", became the name for the entire Mass. The Breaking of the Bread reminds us of the Lord himself who was broken for our sake.

Invitation to Communion

The priest elevates the Body & Blood of Christ in a gesture of invitation saying, "Behold the Lamb of God" (*see John 1:29, 26*). Our response is taken from the biblical account of the centurion who pleaded with Jesus to heal his servant: "Lord, I am not worthy" (*Mt 8:8*).

When we approach the minister of Communion we bow before the Sacred Host and Chalice as the minister says, "The Body of Christ" or "the Blood of Christ." Our "Amen" is a simple response with immense implications. It means first of all that what we receive is the true and real Body and Blood of Christ. It also means that we are prepared to take the words of the consecration seriously, namely, "Do this in memory of me." Christ asks of each of us to be eucharist for others, to be bread broken and wine poured out for others. Our "Amen" is a commitment to imitate the servant Jesus. Furthermore, with our "Amen" we proclaim our belief that when we eat and drink at the Lord's table, we become the Body of Christ. St. Augustine (4th c) put it beautifully:

"If therefore you are the body of Christ and members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table; you are receiving your mystery. To that which you are, you answer, "Amen," and by responding you agree. For you hear, "The Body of Christ," and you respond, "Amen." Be a member of the body of Christ, so that your "Amen" may be true."

The norm established in the Dioceses of the United States is that the communicant is to receive Communion standing. The importance of everyone observing the same posture is to clearly demonstrate the Church's unity. This is not a time to display one's private piety or individuality by choosing another posture. The importance of unity in the communion rite is fostered and demonstrated by our singing together during the communion rite.

The faithful may receive Communion either in the hand or on the tongue. The inspiring words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (4th c) offer a unique commentary on receiving Communion in the hand. He tells us: "When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King." Remember that in Baptism and Confirmation we were anointed with sacred chrism oil designating our bodies as holy and sacred to God. Thus we can reverently receive the Lord in our hands. If we receive on the tongue, the communicant is expected to open his/her mouth wide enough and place his/her tongue forward so the minister can administer the host without difficulty or danger of losing the host.

The Church strongly recommends receiving Holy Communion under both forms, i.e. host and chalice, "so that by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated" (*Roman Missal #85*). However, even if one receives only from the chalice or only under the species of bread, one receives the whole Christ.

After a brief period of silent prayer the Communion Rite concludes with the **Prayer after Communion**, in which the priest prays that what we have just celebrated may bear fruit within us and give us the grace to take Christ into the world.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ Reflect more deeply on the words, "Do this in memory of me." And in light of this, think about what your "Amen" means when you receive Communion.
- ⇒ St. John Paul II referred to the Mass as the "School of Love." What do you think he meant by that?



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Part VIII: The Concluding Rites (by Fr. Ron Lewinski)

The Final Blessing and Dismissal

The Communion Rite concludes with a period of silent prayer or meditation hymn and then the Prayer After Communion. The Mass ends almost immediately as the priest celebrant imparts God's blessing and the deacon dismisses us. Catholics sometimes wonder why the Mass comes to end so abruptly after Communion. Perhaps the answer is to be found in a deeper understanding of what our reception of Holy Communion leads to. Namely, after we have received the Gift of God in the Eucharist, we are sent to share the good news we have celebrated at the altar with everyone we meet beyond the church doors. In other words, the Eucharist makes us missionaries. We could hardly say that we have embraced the gift of the Eucharist unless we have also accepted the charge to be missionary disciples. At the time of the Consecration in the Mass we hear the words of Jesus: "Do this in memory of me." He has just given us his Body and Blood. Now he asks us to go forth and be bread broken and wine poured out for the transformation of the world.

The Teaching of St. John Paul II

There are two quotes from St. John Paul II that are worth meditating on as a means of understanding this post-communion charge to discipleship:

"Entering into communion with Christ in the memorial of his Pasch also means sensing the duty to be a missionary of the event made present in that rite. The dismissal at the end of Mass is a *charge* given to Christians, inviting them to work for the spread of the Gospel and the imbuing of society with Christian values." (St. John Paul II, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, #25)

"For the faithful who have understood the meaning of what they have done, the Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door....Once the assembly disperses, Christ's disciples return to their everyday surroundings with the commitment to make their whole life a gift, a spiritual sacrifice pleasing to God (cf. Romans 12;1). They feel indebted to their brothers and sisters because of what they have received in the celebration, not unlike the disciples of Emmaus, once they had recognized the Risen Christ 'in the breaking of the bread' (cf. Luke 24; 30-32), felt the need to return immediately to share with their brothers and sisters the joy of meeting the Lord (cf. Luke 24; 33-35)." (St. John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, #45)

The Rite of Commissioning

The Final Blessing and the words of dismissal then are not just a generic blessing and an announcement that Mass is over. We have to think of this simple rite of blessing and dismissal as a commissioning rite. After sharing the Lord's Table and strengthening the bonds between us as believers, now we are sent in mission to extend the love and mercy and hope we found in this extraordinary gift of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

The Words of Dismissal

Pope Benedict XVI added two new options in the revised Roman Missal for the words of dismissal: "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord" and "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." These two new options are a clear expression of the link that we have to make between our participation in the Mass and our engagement in the world. We cannot hide our light under a bushel basket.

Our Final Prayer: The Recessional Hymn

As we take leave it is the cross of Jesus that goes before us. We go into the world under the banner of our salvation, Christ crucified and risen. Our concluding hymn is not just traveling music for the ministers of the altar to exit gracefully. Every hymn is also a prayer. We would be wise to pay attention to the words we sing. Even if we don't consider ourselves much of a singer, joining in the community's final prayer made in song can give us added incentive to put into practice what we have just celebrated together at the altar.

Questions to think and pray about:

- ⇒ Since we are obliged to share with others the good news of what we have heard and experienced at Mass, listen carefully the next time you are at Mass for a word or message that God may be putting in your heart to communicate to others in the coming week.
- ⇒ What are we missing when we regularly leave Mass before it is completely over? What does our early exit say to the remaining worshippers? To our youth?
- ⇒ This now concludes an eight part series on the Mass. How will you continue to grow in your understanding of the Mass and an appreciation for the Liturgy?

