

“WHY” COME TO MASS?

At the most fundamental level, it might be worthy to pause and reflect on the larger “why” we come to Mass. Simply put, we come to receive God’s grace and to give God thanks and praise.

One of the greatest insights of my life was the day I recognized that I didn’t come to Mass “to take” or “to get” anything. For me, coming to Mass, from that time on, was about what I was giving. I come to give God thanks and praise, and I’m open to receive whatever grace he pours out upon me. I came to recognize that coming to Mass was not about “being entertained” or “feeling good.” And the objections of family members or friends who stopped coming to Mass because “they didn’t get anything out of it” no longer made any sense to me. The music could be slow and off-key, the homily could be dry and boring, the seats might be uncomfortable, the service might take forty minutes or two hours - but I was there to *give*, and when I walked away, I knew I had given my best - my best responses, my best singing... my best, given back to a God who had given me more than I could have hoped for. Though, I will quickly admit, good music and good preaching made it easier for me to give my best....

TWO-FOLD STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

In terms of structure, you simply need to know that there are two parts - a Liturgy of the Word, and a Liturgy of the Eucharist. If you want to begin to understand a little more, you might recognize that - just like how most things have an introduction and a conclusion - there is also an Opening Rite [R-I-T-E] and a Concluding Rite.

The Opening Rite

The Opening Rite usually begins by a procession to the altar, while we unite our voices together in a gathering song. The music, with its rhythm and beat, helps us stay together, not reading along faster or slower than the others. Thus, the unity of our voices, all singing together, is supposed to help us reflect our unity in Christ. In fact, the Church says, “they... are to shun any appearance of individualism or division, keeping before their mind that they have one Father in heaven and therefore are all brothers and sisters to each other” (GIRM, 62).

There is a sign of the cross, reminding us of our baptism, and scriptural greeting. Currently, we can then either: (1) really focus on our baptism by blessing water, (2) or, acknowledging our sins, proclaim God’s mercy [the “I confess to Almighty God...” or a version of “Lord have mercy...”]. We then usually sing of God’s mercy and glory in the Gloria. And finally, there is an opening prayer that gathers our individual prayers together (or collects us into one).

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

With the opening rite ended, we sit back and open our minds and hearts to God speaking

to us through the scriptures. We gather at the table of God's Word.

Usually, this first entails an Old Testament reading, and after having heard God's Word, we give thanks. "The Word of the Lord." ["Thanks be to God"]. ...I wonder how many times in my life I've said those four little words, "thanks be to God," without giving any thought as to the meaning. As a community, we then also respond or "talk back with" God using the Psalms of the Old Testament, and, as the psalms were written to be sung, we usually sing them. Then, we usually listen to a passage from the New Testament writings, and again we give God thanks.

At this point, out of respect for the words of the Gospel, we stand. The Gospel or Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed to us, and in joy, we give God praise. "The Gospel of the Lord." ["Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ"]. Then, the minister reflects on how these things we have heard in God's word can be applied to our lives or what they mean. Having listened and reflected on God's Word, we again respond. But this time, we respond by proclaiming our faith. And having professed our faith, we then - as a priestly people, united in Christ - we stand before God and intercede for all of humanity - praying for the Church, for civil authorities, those oppressed by various needs, and the dead. It might be of interest to note, not simply praying that *God* will do something but that God will use *us* to do something.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

We then gather at the Table of the Lord for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The altar is set, and the gifts - bread and wine - are brought forward, along with the collection. From creation, God has given us wheat and grapes. By human effort, these gifts are turned into bread and wine. Thus, the bread and wine are also symbolic of our own efforts and sacrifices. The preparation of the gifts ends with an invitation to the People of God to pray that "our sacrifice may be acceptable." Finally, there is a short prayer in preparation for the Eucharistic prayer.

"Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins" (GIRM, 54) - the Great Eucharistic Prayer, by which Christ makes himself present to us. It begins with the dialogue [The Lord be with you...] and ends with the Doxology and the Great Amen [Through Him, with Him, in Him; in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours almighty Father, forever and ever]. The Church says, "In the celebration of the Mass the faithful are a holy people, a people God has made his own, a royal priesthood: they give thanks to the Father and offer the victim [Christ] not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him and learn to offer themselves" (GIRM, 62). I'll have more to say about this prayer later....

United, we call upon the Almighty as "Our Father," seeking our daily bread and the forgiveness of sins. Then, we pray for peace and unity within the Church and we share a sign of our peace and unity with one another. (It is *not a* greeting.) The one bread is broken, while we sing about the Lamb of God who was and is broken for us, and we who are many share in the one loaf (c.f., 1 Cor).

Then following communion, there is again a brief prayer that asks that the mystery we have just celebrated actually transform our lives or changes us in some way, and with that prayer, the Liturgy of the Eucharist ends.

The Concluding Rite

After the prayer, the concluding rite begins (and ends almost instantaneously). Here in the parish, we dismiss ministers to the homebound, the nursing home and the imprisoned. Then, there is a brief greeting, blessing, and dismissal for the entire assembly.

Of interesting historical note, people started calling the celebration of the Eucharist “the Mass” because of the last dismissal. In Latin, the dismissal was *ie, Missa est*, which means “it is / you are sent.” This dismissal is a clear reminder that, having celebrated Christ’s presence, we are now called to carry Christ out into the world. We are sent, to go, to all the nations. The Church says that this dismissal “sends each member back to doing good works, while praising and blessing the Lord” (GIRM, 57).

Having again encountered the risen Christ, having touched the paschal mystery of his life, death and resurrection, having recalled who we are, having refreshed ourselves for a moment in the shade of the Almighty, we get up to again begin the work to which Christ has called us.