

An Introduction to the Mass

for those who are unfamiliar with Catholic worship
(and for Catholics who may wish to know a bit more!)

You cannot be long in a Catholic school before you encounter the Mass. If you are not a Catholic, this can be a bewildering experience! You will soon see that regular celebration of the Mass, on feast days and to mark the seasons of the Church and school year, is central to the life of a Catholic school.

This short paper has been written for those unfamiliar with Catholic worship to help them understand what is going on and to feel comfortable attending Mass with their colleagues and pupils. It may also be of help to Catholics who wish to learn a little more.

Worship consists of a mixture of prayers, songs and music, gestures, rites. Many of these are very ancient (Christianity is two thousand years old but borrows scripture readings, prayers and rites from its parent religion, Judaism, which goes back another two thousand years).

At the heart of the Mass are the Liturgy¹ of the Word (which proclaims and reflects upon the word of God found in the Bible readings) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (in which bread and wine are taken and, in a great prayer of thanksgiving, are, according to the belief of Catholics, changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, to be shared among the people).

There are also short introductory and concluding rites.

Introductory Rites

The purpose of the introductory rites is to bring everyone together as a worshipping community, and to prepare us to listen to the word of God in the scripture readings, and to celebrate the eucharist.

At the beginning of the Mass, there will be often be an **entrance hymn** – singing helps bring individuals together as a worshipping congregation and the words of the hymn will usually say something about the feast day or liturgical season² which is being celebrated at this Mass.

The **procession** with the cross (the principal symbol of Jesus Christ and the Christian religion), accompanied by lights (candles) and sometimes incense, leads the priest to the **altar** which is the focus of Catholic worship (along with the **lectern** from which the word of God is proclaimed).

¹ *Liturgy* is a Greek word (λειτουργία) which literally means ‘the work of the people’ – describing the due that people give to God; in English we use the word *worship*, literally *worth-ship* or to give worth, or honour, to something, in this case God.

² The Christian calendar has a cycle of seasons through the year: it begins with *Advent* (in November/December), the season of preparation for the great feast and season of *Christmas* (celebrating the birth of Jesus). Then there is a period of ‘*ordinary time*’ leading up to *Ash Wednesday* which is the beginning of the season of *Lent*. Lent is the time of preparation, lasting 40 days, for the great feast and season of *Easter*. The season of Easter lasts 50 days and concludes with the feast of *Pentecost*. The seasons are indicated by the colour of the vestments used at Mass (white for Christmas, Easter and great feast days), purple for the ‘preparing’ seasons of Advent and Lent, green for ‘ordinary time’, and red for the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) and for the feast days of Christian martyrs.

In Catholic worship, the priest presides at the liturgy. He begins with the **sign of the cross** and **welcomes everyone** to the celebration. He will also explain what we are celebrating today.

Before we get going with the central parts of the Mass (the Liturgies of Word and Eucharist), we acknowledge that we come with our faults and failings (Christian theology uses the word *sin*). The priest will invite us to **consider our sinfulness** in a moment of silence followed by a prayer (the *confiteor*) and/or song (the *Kyrie*) which asks God for forgiveness.

On Sundays and big feast days, the hymn of praise (the *gloria*) follows using the words of the angels at Christ's birth according to Luke's gospel: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will.'³ This hymn is a paean to Jesus, in whose name Christians gather to celebrate the eucharist.

The introductory rites are then drawn together by a prayer known as the **collect** (because its job is to collect together and focus our thoughts on what we are doing here and, more importantly, what God is doing here for us).

We are now ready and open to hear God's word in the scripture and so we sit for the readings.

The Liturgy of the Word

This part of the Mass centres on readings from scripture. First there will be a **reading from the Old Testament** (the Hebrew Bible shared with Judaism) or from one of the letters sent by St Paul or St Peter to one of the fledgling Christian communities in, for example, Rome, Corinth (near Athens) or Philippi (in north-eastern Greece).

The reading is followed by a **psalm** (one of 150 psalms in the Old Testament, some of which date back to the middle of the 11th century BC).

On Sundays and major feast days, there will be a second scripture reading.

Then comes a sung '**alleluia!**'⁴ which heralds the proclamation of the **gospel** – the most important part of the scriptures for Christians. You will notice that the reading of the gospel is surrounded by rituals which emphasize its importance: we stand for its proclamation, the book of the gospels may be carried in procession accompanied by lights (candles), it is the priest who reads, incense may be used, and, at the end, the priest will kiss the words of the gospel as a sign of reverence. There is also a little ritual as it is announced which gospel is being read when everyone makes a small sign of the cross on their foreheads (mind), lips, and chest (heart) signifying our desire to think like the gospel, to speak its message, and to live by its law of love.

After the gospel, comes the **homily**, or sermon, in which the priest will unfold the meaning of the readings have just heard and suggest ways in which they can inspire our lives.

After the homily, comes another response to the word of God – the **bidding prayers** which bring the needs of those present, and of the wider world, before God.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the part of the Mass which replicates what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper which he shared with his disciples, the night before he died.

The earliest and simplest account we have of the Last Supper is in St Paul's letter to the Christian community at Corinth:

'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do

³ Luke 2:14

⁴ *Alleluia* is a Jewish prayer, adopted by Christians, meaning 'praise be to God!' (Hebrew יהוה הללו).

this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”⁵

These simple gestures of taking, breaking and sharing bread, and blessing a cup of wine and sharing it, have been surrounded by other words and rituals over the course of the two thousand years that the Christian church has been following Jesus’ command to ‘do this in memory of me’.⁶

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the **bread and wine being brought to the altar** (known as the *offertory*), often accompanied by singing. The priest raises the bread⁷ and then the cup (the *chalice*) above the altar while saying some very ancient Jewish prayers, a version of which Jesus himself would certainly have said at Sabbath prayers (the *shabbat*) every Saturday night, just as the Jews do today. Christian worship has its roots in Jewish worship.

Then the priest begins the **great prayer of eucharist** (*eucharist* is a Greek word meaning *giving thanks*). He invites the people to lift up their hearts to God and to give thanks. The first part of the great prayer (the **preface** from an old Latin word *praefatio* meaning *to praise*) praises what God has done for us in sending us his Son, Jesus. This preface changes according to the season or feast day and is a good statement of the theology specific to that celebration). The people respond by saying or singing ‘**Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts**’ (the *sanctus*).

The great prayer then continues by asking God to **send down his Spirit** on the gifts of bread and wine so that they may be changed into the body and blood of Christ. Watch the priest’s hands as they are held above the bread and wine to signify this (known as the *epiclesis* – Greek for *calling down*).

Then comes the **institution narrative**. The story of the Last Supper is retold and the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples are re-spoken, as they

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (RSV CE translation)

⁶ Luke 22:19

⁷ The bread that is used at Mass is unleavened bread, just as the Jews use at Passover. Because it is not made with yeast it stays fresh for a long time.

have been in Christian communities every day in every part of the world for two thousand years. This is a moment of intense reverence for Catholics: you will see the priest genuflect and people bow their heads (and often kneel if they are not already kneeling), a bell is rung to draw attention to this moment of high liturgical drama, and incense is used to honour the bread, now the body of Christ, and, a few moments later, the wine, now the blood of Christ. The priest then makes the simple proclamation, ‘The mystery⁸ of faith.’ These words sum up what Catholics believe has just happened – that the bread and wine, while not changing their outward appearance (they still look, smell, and taste like bread and wine), have become⁹ the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the presence of the living God in our midst.¹⁰ The people then say or sing an acclamation of faith.

The great prayer then continues with **prayers for the living and the dead**. It concludes with the **doxology** (a Greek word for *glory/honour*) as the priest lifts the consecrated bread and wine, now the body and blood of Christ, to God the Father, singing or saying:

‘Through him, and with him, and in him,¹¹
O God, almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honour is yours,
for ever and ever.’

The people make the whole of the great eucharistic prayer their own by acclaiming, ‘**Amen!**’¹²

⁸ Confusingly, *mystery* (Greek μυστήριον, Latin *sacramentum*) in Christian theology means that which has been revealed and made manifest by God (but which, before Christ, was hidden to our understanding).

⁹ This belief is known as *transubstantiation* in Catholic theology.

¹⁰ This is why the bread of the eucharist is treated with very great respect. Any bread left over is kept in silver/gold vessels in the tabernacle in the church/chapel and the presence of the living God signified by a red light (the *sanctuary lamp*) which is kept burning always.

¹¹ ‘him’ refers to Jesus Christ, present in the bread and wine being lifted above the altar.

¹² ‘Amen’ is a one-word prayer which means ‘Yes, I agree!’ or ‘So be it!’ – it is the people’s way of assenting to, and making their own, everything the priest has said

The Liturgy of the Eucharist now changes tempo as attention switches from the priest offering the bread and wine at the altar, on behalf of the people, to the people preparing themselves to eat the bread and drink the wine, as they are commanded to do by Jesus. These next prayers and rituals are known as the **Communion Rite**. First of all, the people stand and say the prayer that Jesus himself taught us, the **Lord's Prayer**, the 'Our Father'.¹³

Then there is a prayer for peace and the invitation to the people to exchange a **sign of peace** (usually a handshake, or a kiss among family members). This sign of peace recalls Jesus' instruction, 'If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you . . . go, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.'¹⁴ Before we come to the altar to receive God's gift in communion, we first reconcile ourselves to our brothers and sisters in the congregation, representing the wider group of people out there in our daily lives.

After the sign of peace comes another dramatic gesture in which the people acknowledge what they believe: that in this bread and wine is the presence of the living God, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The priest lifts the bread (and sometimes the wine also) above the altar, showing it to the people, and saying, '**Behold, the Lamb of God**. Behold, him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.'¹⁵ The people respond with a statement of faith: 'Lord, I am not worthy that

just previously. It is a prayer shared by Jews (in Hebrew אָמֵן), Christians (in Greek ἀμήν or Latin *Amen*) and Muslims (in Arabic آمين).

¹³ The *Our Father* is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples when they saw him praying and asked, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' You will find it in two of the gospels: Matthew 6:9, and Luke 11:2.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:23-24

¹⁵ The image of the *Lamb of God* (in Latin *Agnus Dei*) comes from the encounter of Jesus with his cousin, John the Baptist, recorded in John's gospel (1:29). John's use of the word *Lamb* to describe Jesus prefigures the way in which Jesus will be sacrificed on the cross (the Paschal Lamb) to take away the sins of the world, just as the Jews sacrificed a lamb at Passover, marking their delivery from the Egyptians (see Exodus 12).

you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.'¹⁶

Then comes another of the most sacred parts of the Mass as people come forward to the altar to receive communion (the consecrated bread and sometimes the wine also) from the priest who says to each, 'The body of Christ', inviting the reply, 'Amen'. After communion there is usually a period of quiet for reflection or a song.

Concluding Rite

The Mass finishes fairly abruptly. There is simply a **blessing** and then the priest sends the people out (the **dismissal**) to live in their daily lives what they have just celebrated in the Mass.¹⁷

What should I do?

There is probably an expectation at your school that you will attend the Mass, which is an important expression of our identity as a Catholic community. You should know that you are most welcome here.

You should feel free to join in the prayers and gestures or not, according to your own belief and practice, while respecting the religious practice of others.

In the Catholic church, communion (receiving the bread and wine) is reserved for Catholics. If you are not a Catholic you are always welcome to come forward for a blessing – you indicate this by placing an arm, or both, over your chest.



Shared Vision Induction
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¹⁶ These are the words of the centurion in Matthew's gospel (8:8) who has asked Jesus to heal his servant.

¹⁷ If you have wondered what the word *Mass* means, nobody really knows. The best suggestion is that it comes from the words of the dismissal in Latin: '*Ite, missa est!*' The word *missa* (meaning 'go forth') perhaps became corrupted into *mass*, a Catholic name for the celebration of the eucharist, the Lord's supper.