

What Happens At Mass? – I

As we prepare for the reception of the new Roman Missal next Advent, we have been asked to use this time as an opportunity to renew our understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist. I have said a few things in recent months; this is part of an ongoing, occasional series.

The Opening Rites of Mass consist of the entrance procession and accompanying song or chant; the Sign of the Cross; the Greeting dialogue; a brief introduction of the Mass of the day; the Penitential Rite; the Gloria when indicated; and the Collect or Opening Prayer.

The purpose of all of these rites is to help us make the transition from our everyday world and concerns to the public worship of God and thanksgiving for the gift of salvation in Christ. Although they go by quickly, each has deep significance.

However, how we prepare ourselves in the days, hours, and minutes before we arrive at Mass are also essential if we are truly to offer ourselves to this Mystery and pray well together. Readings are available online (usccb.org/nab); in magazines like *Magnificat* or *The Word Among Us*; or in the hymnals in the pews. To read over the readings prayerfully in the days before Mass – or even as you come to church that day and wait for the celebration to begin – is an excellent preparation for truly hearing the Word of God. To dress appropriately, modestly, and in tasteful but not overly elaborate clothing shows respect for the Lord and one another. To arrive on time or before Mass begins is a sign of courtesy and reverence for the importance of Mass. To turn off the radio and focus discussion on matters related to faith in the car or on foot while coming to Church helps create a frame of mind before even arriving. The Eucharistic fast – no food or drink other than water for at least an hour before receiving Communion, no gum or candy – can go beyond mere habit and become an intentional choice to express a “hunger” for the Eucharist. Leave cell phones, pagers, and other electronics at home or in the car (out of sight for protection) to avoid the temptation and distraction of these conveniences (emergency personnel excepted). Maintain silence in the church and as much as possible in the areas around the church to help create a spirit of recollection and purpose.

The Church’s liturgy demands full, conscious, and active participation. Just “showing up” and hoping to be moved by what others say and do will not suffice – Christ can speak effectively only to those willing to hear and follow.

What Happens at Mass? – II

The Opening Rites of Mass begin with the entrance procession, usually accompanied by a song or chant.

The procession is more than a practical way to get from one place to another – from the sacristy to the sanctuary – it is deeply symbolic of the entire journey of faith, approaching salvation in Christ, Who is represented in symbol by the altar where the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Cross is made present to us here and now. Depending on the arrangement of the particular church building, we walk “into” the church from “outside,” first coming to faith; we walk past the Baptismal Font, our first sharing in the life of Christ, our beginning as Christian members of His Body; and we come closer and closer to the sanctuary, where God reaches down to us and draws us into a new life, foreshadowing eternal life with Him. Often, the procession is led by the Cross, as our lives are meant to follow that Way of Jesus, laying down our lives with Him; the Book of Gospels is often carried because “Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light to my path”; and those in procession walk together because we are called as a community of faith, not merely as individuals.

Occasionally, the Church’s liturgy itself invites the entire congregation to be in the procession, as on the Feast of the Presentation (February 2), and especially Palm Sunday and

the Easter Vigil. Pastoral needs alter this somewhat, but the faithful are earnestly invited to join in these processions when asked by the Church.

The procession is usually accompanied by singing, a sign of joy and purpose in this journey. All are expected to join in singing; it is not an optional part of the Rite. Those who do not sing deprive the congregation of full participation; at the very least, all ought to read along with the words of these songs/chants as integral parts of the Church's prayer.

What Happens at Mass? – III

When the celebrant reaches the altar, he kisses it as a sign of reverence for this central symbol of Christ, our great High Priest, Who will again make that sacrifice of His Body and Blood present to us on this altar. As one of the Lenten prefaces puts it so well: "He showed Himself to be the priest, the altar, and the lamb of sacrifice."

We begin our common prayer with the Sign of the Cross – a physical gesture reminding us of the bodily gift of Christ on the Cross for us, and a link to our Baptism, where we were each told by the minister of that sacrament at the beginning of the rite: "I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of His Cross." This gesture is accompanied by the words: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This is the earliest known profession of faith in the Church; both the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed are expansions of this basic testimony. We offer all that we will do for the coming hour or so to God by proclaiming that our prayer, our listening to the Word, our singing, our attention, and our opening our lives anew to Christ's presence in the Eucharist are done in the name of God, a gift of ourselves to the Lord to receive the far greater gifts He will give us.

In addition, the invocation of the Trinity reminds us that God is a communion of Persons; all Three are present to sanctify and save us. Made in the image of God, we come together in community to pray in unison, not as individuals conducting personal devotions but as the Body of Christ, sharing in the one perfect offering of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. This is the Church's official prayer, which we seek to offer as the Church directs, not simply as we might prefer. As Pope Benedict said so eloquently: "When I belong to Christ and His Church, I know I am never alone."

What Happens at Mass? – IV

The celebrant now greets the people in the name of the Church, using a text drawn from the Scriptures. An example of the richness of these texts that can be easily overlooked: the second option is from the greeting of most of Paul's letters, where he offers "grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Two things are asserted here that might be lost to a modern hearer. First, "grace" (Greek *charis*) is the customary greeting to a Greek-speaking Gentile. "Peace" (Greek *eirene*, translating the Hebrew *shalom*) is the greeting for a Jew. Thus, Paul is emphasizing the unity of Gentile and Jew in the new revelation of salvation in Christ. Further, because of baptism into Christ, God's Son, we too call upon God as "Father" and acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah (*christos*) and Lord (*kyrios*, a reference to the divine name Yahweh).

The simplest form: "The Lord be with you," expresses a prayer for the presence of Christ in the assembled faithful, and a reminder to prepare ourselves for the reality that Christ is coming to us. The response to this invocation is one of the changes coming next Advent: "and with your spirit." Faithful to the Latin "et cum spiritu tuo", this text highlights the fact that the priest – a man like others in body and soul – is here presiding not on his own merits and virtues, but in the power of the Spirit entrusted to him in Holy Orders. It is a gesture of humility

by the priest and respect for the office of the priesthood by the faithful – who are reminded to look beyond the particular priest in order to encounter Christ, the true Priest.

A brief introduction to the Mass of the day is usually given, yet another moment to be drawn out of the routines and concerns of daily life and truly enter into this time with the Lord. These comments are not scripted by the rite, but allow us to focus as needed on the meaning of the feast or season; a theme from the readings; events in the community or the world that might be on our minds as we gather. These comments usually lead into the Penitential Rite where indicated in the rubrics. (By the way: the term “rubric” literally means “reddened” – those parts of the rites that are instructions for how to perform them are printed in red ink, while the texts spoken in the rite are in black.)

What Happens at Mass? – V

The Gloria follows the Penitential Rite (except during Advent and Lent due to the more somber and penitential nature of those seasons). The Gloria is an ancient hymn of praise to God, taking its first words from Luke 2:14, the hymn of the angels at the birth of Christ. Other phrases were added to amplify this praise in the 2nd-3rd centuries. It is preferably sung but can be recited. This is another text that will change somewhat in the new Missal to be a more literal translation of the Latin. It helps us transition from our sorrow for sin to God’s greatness, shown above all in our redemption that we may hope for eternal life in union with the Trinity through “Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.”

The final Introductory Rite is the “Collect” or Opening Prayer. We are invited, “Let us pray” and then given a brief time of silence to do so as individuals; these personal prayers are then “collected” and drawn into the official prayer of the Church as we ask to share in what the Mass can do in our lives. These prayers are offered to the Father, “through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.” Thus our Introductory Rites are neatly bookended – beginning by invoking the Trinity with the Sign of the Cross and concluding the same way.

We stand throughout these rites as a sign of our readiness to serve the Lord and as a transition from our regular chores to come into the presence of God. Now we are seated to listen with attention to the Word of God – Christ – speak to us.

What Happens at Mass? – VI

When the Introductory Rites, intended to help us transition from the routines of life and enter into the Church’s public worship, are completed, we come to the first of the two major parts of Mass: the Liturgy of the Word.

As *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, put it so well: God reveals Himself and His plan for our salvation to us in both words and deeds. The words explain the deeds, and the deeds give proof of the words. This mystery of divine revelation is made present in every Mass. In the Liturgy of the Word, God speaks to us, giving Himself to us in word; in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, God acts for us, giving Himself to us in deed.

Since Christ is the Word made flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity incarnate, there is an essential link between these two parts of the Mass. Just as we long for the Body and Blood of Jesus in the sacrament of the Eucharist, so we ought to long for the Word of Jesus spoken to us. The Liturgy of the Word is not simply a prelude to the part of Mass that “matters”; the two tables of Word and Sacrament are inseparable in this celebration. St. Jerome put it this way:

“We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: *whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53)*, even though these words can also be understood of the [Eucharistic] Mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching. When we approach the [Eucharistic] Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?”

What Happens at Mass? – VII

There have been many beautiful and profound spiritual writings over the centuries. But at Mass, we do not listen to Augustine or Aquinas or John Chrysostom, or to Dante or Milton or Lewis or any other human voice. We listen to the Word of God: the readings proclaimed at Mass are the very word of God spoken to us.

In some sense, the words of Jesus about the promised Messiah in Isaiah 61:1-2 could be said of every reading of the Word of God in the liturgy: “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” These are not simply a record of past revelation, though they are rooted in our history; “indeed, God’s Word is living and effective” (Hebrews 4:12). It is worth pausing to ponder: God speaks to us. He answers our questions, enters into dialogue with us, reveals Himself to us. In a world where God seems distant or absent to many, it is critical to remember: God continually speaks to us.

One of the liturgical changes at the Second Vatican Council was to offer a more comprehensive and diverse selection of readings from the Scriptures during the course of the liturgical year. This emphasis on Scripture was consistent with a theme that recurred in various other areas of the Council’s discussion: in moral theology, in formation for priests and religious, in social communication, and others. While we are not simply a “people of the book,” since we also believe the Word of God speaks to us through the Tradition of the Church, the Scriptures are an essential point of reference for knowing that Word, made flesh in Christ.

Thus, on Sundays, there is a three-year cycle: Year A presents Matthew; Year B, Mark; and Year C, Luke. John is heard in much of Lent and Easter. The Old Testament (“first”) readings – including the Responsorial Psalm – are chosen to coincide in theme with the Gospels; the New Testament (“second”) readings are read sequentially.

What Happens at Mass? – VIII

To get the most out of the Liturgy of the Word, we cannot be mere passive spectators; we must actively listen. Among the time-tested strategies that have helped people truly hear the Word:

- Read the Sunday readings during the week prior and ask yourself some questions: what is this reading about? How do the readings fit together? What is the key theme? What do I not understand? What is the history behind this passage – what was going on in salvation history? What are the passages leading up to and following this passage – what is the context?
- While waiting for Mass to begin, read the readings again as part of your prayerful preparation.
- During the readings, some prefer to follow along in the hymnals or missalette; other do better by closing their eyes and concentrating on the word-

picture being created, especially with events or episodes being described. Remember that at Mass, the emphasis is on the Word being proclaimed aloud, not simply read in common, which we can do any time on our own.

- Ask: what is God saying to the Church in these readings? What is God saying to me? What does God want me to hear?

- Try to pick out a word or phrase that strikes you and commit it to memory as a focus for the coming week's prayer and reflection

The homily follows. The homily is intended to explain and illuminate this Word we have heard together; connect it to the larger story of salvation history, current events, and the present liturgical celebration; and suggest practical ways to take this Word into our daily lives. We post our homilies on line after the weekend for your further reflection. The homily cannot possibly say all that can be said about the Word; we encourage you to continue to ponder God's message and ask: "What does this mean to me, and for me?" Or, to ask in the words of the crowds who listened to Peter at Pentecost: "What then should we do?"

What Happens at Mass? – IX

After the homily, the Profession of Faith is prayed together. In the Word, God has revealed something to us and invited our faithful response; in the Profession of Faith, we make that response and remind ourselves of the "whole picture" of our faith. This common profession is another way we are gathered as one, sharing these common convictions that have endured down the ages. We share them not only with those standing around us and those around the world today; this is the same faith that goes back to what has been revealed to us by Christ and understood with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and professed by believers across all these centuries and cultures, places and times of the Church. It also brings each of us back to our Baptism, when this faith was first professed by (or for) us and entrusted to our commitment throughout life.

The Creed we pray at the Mass is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, a formula that was the result of long, careful prayer and deliberation, and the subject of sometimes bitter divisions. Each word is filled with significance and history.

Arguably the key issues that led to the development of the Creed related, of course, to the Incarnation – struggling to understand and express exactly what we believe as Christians about the Person of Jesus Christ. At both the Councils of Nicea in 325 and of Constantinople in 381, the impact of Arianism was at stake.

Arianism is difficult to summarize, and the history is complex. Arius prompted a variety of related beliefs that we know primarily through arguments about these doctrines – but it is fundamentally contrary to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity: the belief that there is only one God Who is a community of three co-equal, co-eternal Persons. In most forms of the teaching of Arius and his followers, the Son was not eternal, or of one nature with God, but was a dependent instrument created for the redemption of the world. The Church – led by figures like St. Athanasius, St. Augustine, St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and others – maintained that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity who assumed human nature without surrendering the divine nature.

What Happens at Mass? – X

Perhaps the key term that summarizes the disputes around Arianism is the Greek term *homoousios*, meaning "same substance" or "same being." This term represents orthodox Catholic belief in contrast to the term used by Arius: *homoiousios*, meaning "similar

substance” or “like substance.” That single “iota” in Greek marks a definitive split in belief (by the way, this theological history is the origin of sayings like: “it matters not one iota.”).

So in addition to the theological difficulties of understanding the Trinity and the Incarnation, language was also an issue at times between theologians writing and speaking in Greek and those using Latin. Philosophy and metaphysics are unavoidable parts of this history: what exactly do we mean by terms like “nature,” “substance,” “being,” “person,” etc.? Is the Greek “*ousios*” the same as the Latin “*substantia*,” or is it more like “*natura*” or “*esse*”? It is not my purpose to explain all this in depth (even if I had the ability!) but simply to point out that those words of the Creed like “consubstantial” and “incarnate,” perhaps foreign to us and certainly not part of everyday conversation, have a long, rich, and decisive history.

One of the key changes to the translation of the Profession of Faith we will pray is precisely that phrase: that the Son is “consubstantial with the Father.” Currently, we say “one in being with the Father.” This is not as precise as it could be, since common usage takes “being” in reference to an individual - a “human being” – to mean a person. But this is exactly what we do not want to say about Christ! Christ is not the same Person as the Father; that would dissolve the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, Christ shares the same divine substance with the Father and the Son, as one and only one God. “Consubstantial” is a direct English translation of the term *homoousios* – “same substance.” Complicated? Indeed! But the core of our faith, so that we are truly saved by God, Whose love led the Son to become one of us for our salvation.

What Happens at Mass? – XI

The Profession of Faith is followed by the General Intercessions. The entire Mass is prayer to God, but prayer takes four main forms: thanksgiving (the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistein*); adoration and worship; contrition or sorrow; and petition. While any form of asking is a “petition,” the term “intercession” highlights the fact that we are made a priestly people at our Baptism, called to concern not only for our own interests and needs, but for the whole Body of Christ. Part of our responsibility as believers is to pray – to intercede – for the needs of others, that all will experience the help they require to love and serve God and come to salvation.

Further, these prayers are called “general” intercessions because they are intended to pray not merely for personal, local, or particular needs, but for all the world “in general.” Thus we do not simply pray for the sick in our parish, but for all the sick; not simply for John and Mary who are celebrating an anniversary, but for all married couples; not simply for our family but for all families throughout the world. The general intercessions help us, as we approach the universal love given and demonstrated by Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, to broaden our own love and concern to those same horizons.

There is an order given to these petitions in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM, n. 70): for the needs of the Church; for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world; for those burdened by any kind of difficulty; and for the local community. As part of their Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, the U.S. bishops have also asked that each parish include a petition for respect for human life each weekend. In addition, many parishes also include a petition for those who have died, although this is always included as well in each of the Eucharistic Prayers.

There are no set formulae for these petitions (except on Good Friday). The GIRM states they should “be sober, be composed freely but prudently, and be succinct, and they should express the prayer of the entire community.” If there is a deacon at the altar, he is normally the proclaimer of these prayers as part of his role in the liturgy; otherwise, they are read by the lector or even by the celebrant. Time is usually left at the end for silent prayers that

are summarized and offered by the celebrant. Each member of the assembly makes the prayer his or her own and exercises that priestly role of intercessor along with Christ, our High Priest, by the heartfelt response: “Lord, hear our prayer.”

What Happens at Mass? – XII

The General Intercessions conclude the Liturgy of the Word, in which God speaks to us. The Liturgy of the Eucharist follows, in which God acts on our behalf, fulfilling the promises of the words.

We begin with the Preparation of the Gifts. A hymn or song often accompanies this action, with a theme from the readings or a general theme of offering. While “the gifts” in question are the bread and wine that will be transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ, weekend Masses also include a collection – our own gifts that help unite our lives with the sacrifice of Christ. This gesture of material offerings is an ancient part of every religion we know and is firmly attested in the Old Testament. But as Christians, we do not make our offerings to “appease God” or as a “temple tax” or to persuade God of our goodness or to “earn” His favor or the granting of our prayers, nor even simply because it is a precept of the Church – all motives we might associate with ritual offerings. Rather, we make our offerings as a free gesture of gratitude to God Who has given us all things in Christ, and as a way to support the work of the Church until He comes again.

The idea of “tithing” from the Old Testament is often encouraged – one-tenth of one’s income, rooted in the gifts of Abraham to Melchizedek way back in Genesis 14:18-20. A more Christian foundation for our gifts is found in Paul’s writings (see II Corinthians 8:1-9:15) – that Christ, though rich, made Himself poor for our sakes, that we might become rich in grace. “The willingness to give should accord with one’s means everyone must give according to what he has inwardly decided: not sadly, not grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver” (8:12; 9:7). Our offerings reflect our stewardship of God’s gifts – for all that we have has been entrusted to us by God, not for our own purposes, but for His (see Matthew 25:14-30; I Corinthians 4:7). While early Christians gave items – wheat, animals, fruit, etc. – to support the Church’s work, our financial gifts also represent the labors of our lives, given back to God in gratitude for all we have received, a way to symbolize offering ourselves along with Christ to the Father. The simple gesture of contributing to the collection is an act of faith, hope, and love.

What Happens at Mass? – XIII

Along with our financial contributions, and central to the Preparation of the Gifts, the bread and wine are brought forward. The texts introduced in 1970 make explicit the link between the Jewish roots of the Passover meal by adopting a form of the “berakah” or blessing prayers of praise to God for the gifts of the earth: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this bread / wine to offer ...”

These elements have deep roots in salvation history – far more than can be summarized here. Bread is the ancient “staff of life” even before the Hebrew people. The king of Salem, Melchizedek, greeted Abram and offered bread and wine (Genesis 14). It was a grain famine that drove the sons of Jacob to Egypt, where they were rescued by their brother Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery; the Israelites were later enslaved themselves (Genesis 37-49). A key element of the Passover ritual was the use of unleavened bread, along with the blood of the paschal lamb, foreshadowing Christ as the true Lamb of God (Exodus 12; John 1:29, 19:36; Revelation 5:6-14). During the Exodus, the people were fed with the mysterious manna, bread from heaven (Exodus 16). Jesus declares Himself to be the Bread of

Life, the Living Bread come down from heaven (John 6); He multiplies the loaves to feed the crowds; and of course at the Last Supper, He institutes the Eucharist with the unleavened bread of His new Passover and says: “Do this in memory of Me.”

Wine, too, is an ancient beverage, its fermentation a symbol of transformation, preservation, and celebration relative to the more basic drink of water. Jesus turns water into wine in His first miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11). Like the cups of wine used in the Jewish celebrations of the Passover meal by His time, Jesus of course uses wine at the Last Supper as well, but with a far deeper meaning: “This is the new Covenant in My blood.”

The Roman rite of the Church continues to use unleavened bread and grape wine for the Eucharist, as these were the elements used by Christ at the Last Supper. Bringing them forward in the procession is more than just a practicality – they could be placed on the altar before Mass began if that was the issue. Rather, this offering is symbolic of bringing creation back into the right relationship with the Creator, through the sacrifice of Christ that this bread and wine will become.

What Happens at Mass? – XIV

As noted, there is a brief prayer of thanks to God over the bread and wine that will become the Eucharist of Jesus Christ. These prayers may be done vocally or silently (usually the latter, accompanied by music during weekend Masses and more solemn celebrations). They bless God for His gifts which are the fruit of the earth and of human labor; they “will become for us the Bread of Life / our spiritual Drink.” The elements are elevated slightly above the altar, to avoid confusion with the later, solemn elevation of the Eucharist for the adoration of the faithful after the consecration – just as our human efforts contribute to the work of salvation, but even these efforts are a gift from greater work of the Lord.

The celebrant then makes a profound bow and offers a beautiful prayer *sotto voce* (quietly): “With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.” Though brief, this moment is an important link to the older history of the liturgy, when many of the prayers were silently offered by the priest, but always on behalf of the whole Church. The liturgy is never a private celebration or an act of personal piety; liturgy by its very nature is the public prayer of the Church, and the whole Church participates in a real, spiritual way, even in the smallest gatherings.

This is also why the Church is clear: “The liturgical books approved by the competent authority are to be faithfully observed in the celebration of the sacraments; therefore, no one on personal authority may add, remove, or change anything in them” (canon 846).” This canon refers not only to the celebrants of the sacraments but also to all who participate in them. When we pray in the liturgy, we leave behind our individual preferences and piety to enter into the great prayer of Christ Himself.

What Happens at Mass? – XV

The celebrant next washes his hands, another ancient gesture with manifold meanings. It is a practical gesture from the days when the celebrant received the gifts of the congregation on behalf of the poor – often items like grain, livestock, produce, and other goods to be distributed to those in need. It is also an ageless ritual action symbolizing the desire for interior cleansing to come into the presence of the Holy. The ablutions to be done before offering sacrifice, as prescribed in the Old Testament for the levitical priesthood, are also implied here, now superseded by the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. And, the gesture is a personal

act of humility on the part of the priest, acknowledging his weakness and reliance on God's mercy for this great mystery about to take place. The words echo King David's admission of his unworthiness: "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (see Psalm 51:4).

Then, the celebrant invites the congregation to unite their prayers with his in order to offer this sacrifice together: "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." Implied here is the dignity of the baptized, a priestly people of God, as St. Paul teaches: "I beg you, through the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). The response sums up the three key purposes of all the Church's liturgy, in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, **for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and for the good of all his holy Church.**"

This response, spoken from the heart, consciously unites the prayers of each into the prayer of Christ for all. The intentions of the Eucharistic Prayer, spoken by the celebrant, are offered for all and by all through their silent attention, as capped and completed by the Great Amen at the end of the Prayer.

What Happens at Mass? – XVI

After the celebrant's invitation to join their prayers to his in offering the Eucharistic sacrifice, he prays the "Prayer over the Offerings." Each Mass has its own proper prayer here, but all of them express the same theme: asking God to accept our prayerful worship, offering ourselves to the Father along with Christ. We stand ready to offer our lives spiritually to God, just as the Lord did literally on the Cross for us – for the celebration of Mass is the very same sacrifice made present in this place and time, in our presence.

Then we begin the great Eucharistic Prayer itself. All has been leading to this: the gathering of an assembly, humble but confident in God's merciful love; the proclamation of God's promise of salvation in the Word; our profession of faith in that promise, also reflected in our trusting prayers of petition; even our willingness to make our union with the gift of Jesus real by our gifts in the collection.

Space does not allow an adequate commentary on each of the richly complex formulae of the various Eucharistic Prayers (EPs) – perhaps another time. Here, let me simply encourage you to listen carefully, attentively, with great focus, to the new texts. Over time, with this patient effort, what now might sound a bit strange or needlessly changed will begin to unfold its deeper meaning. Again, the register of language is made more formal, more literal to the Latin original – not really a change in the text itself, simply a more accurate translation in English of what the rest of the Church has been praying all along.

In addition to the Roman Canon (EP I), the less-used EP IV (intentionally heavy with Scriptural references) and the most commonly used, familiar EPs II ("Lord, you are holy indeed") and III ("Father, you are holy indeed") are included in the new Roman Missal as before. The two EPs for Reconciliation reappear, while the three EPs for Masses with Children are not included (they were never in Latin and so never in the original Roman Missal, thus not retranslated). However, there are four new EPs for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions – more about these next week.

What Happens at Mass? – XVII

As noted in no. XVII, the Roman Missal includes four "new" Eucharistic Prayers for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions. They are not newly composed, but date back to texts composed for the Swiss Synod of Bishops and approved by the Vatican in 1974. It was

revised in an official Latin version in 1991. They were published in an Appendix to the Missal in 1991 and occasionally used, but most people have probably never heard them.

Like all the Eucharistic Prayers (sometimes called “anaphora” from the Greek term in Eastern Churches), these more recent prayers follow the same essential template: an introduction, addressing the goodness and glory of God; the epiclesis, calling down the Holy Spirit on the offerings; the institution narrative, in which the words of Christ at the Last Supper are effective in changing the bread and wine into His Body and Blood; the Memorial Acclamation, in which we proclaim “the mystery of Faith”; the statement of offering of the sacrifice; the anamnesis, in which we “remember” God’s past deeds as the foundation of our trust in the future; a series of petitions that the saving love of Christ will be effective for us and for the world, now and unto eternal life; and the closing doxology in praise of the Trinity. The order and expression of these elements may vary slightly from prayer to prayer, and the variety can help us reflect on the many facets of this mystery.

These four EPs are differentiated by related prefaces and intercessions that present four themes: “The Church on the Way to Unity”; “God Guides the Church on the Way of Salvation”; “Jesus, the Way to the Father”; and “Jesus, the Compassion of God.” These prayers contain some rich images and new phrases that can enhance the faith of those attentive to their texts. Give them ample time to capture your prayer and worship – since there is only one EP used per Mass, it may take months before you hear them all. I believe they will open new paths for the Church’s prayer in common while retaining all the beauty and truth of our faith.

What Happens at Mass? – XVIII

As one of the changes in the peoples’ parts of the Mass, the Memorial Acclamation deserves some attention. Just after the consecration and elevation of the Body and Blood of Jesus, the celebrant invites the assembly to ponder and give voice together to “the mystery of faith” – the offering of Jesus’ life for our redemption, made present here and now to us in the Eucharist.

In the previous translation, four options were given. The first (“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again”), though theologically sound in content, was different in form. The other three are addressed to Christ, as prayers; this one was a statement of fact about Christ. It was an addition to the prior alternatives, being really an adaptation of option B (“Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory.”)

In the new Roman Missal, this first option has been removed so that each of the proclamations of “the mystery of faith” will be prayers of praise and thanksgiving spoken to Christ. Since the texts are changed, musical settings will also be reworked.

The three options will be familiar but with slight changes:

A – We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.

B – When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.

C – Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free.

Again, these changes are not simply for the sake of novelty, but to be more accurate translations of the original Latin text as prayed by the whole Church together, across boundaries of place and vernacular language.

Another small change can be highlighted here: in option B, we speak of the “Cup” since these words are taken from Scripture (I Corinthians 11:26). In the Eucharistic Prayers, however, the text will use the word “chalice” rather than “cup” to translate the Latin “calix.” This

is another example of a slightly more specific and theological tone to the prayers: the cup used at the Last Supper was not just any cup, but made sacred by its use and so designated a chalice.

What Happens at Mass? – XIX

In the Great Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the assembly claims the prayer in its entirety as its own. Having listened attentively, united in spirit to the words spoken on behalf of the Church by the celebrant, all present affirm this thanksgiving to God with their sung or spoken “Amen,” a term of conviction meaning: “it is so, it is true, I believe this.”

We now move to the Communion Rite, where we prepare to unite our lives with Christ’s, made one with Him. We not only receive Jesus; He receives us anew as members of His living Body. Several elements emphasizing unity mark this part of the Mass.

First, we offer together the very prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord’s Prayer. This text will not change, though the invitation of the celebrant has a slightly different wording, as does the prayer of the celebrant that expands on the final petition to “deliver us from evil.”

Second, we offer a Sign of Peace. This is not merely a social gesture or a disruption in the solemnity of the Mass, as some have criticized over time. While it can be misunderstood in these ways, and while the actual exchange of peace remains optional, the Sign of Peace in itself is a profound theological act, since we offer not our peace and greetings to one another, but the peace of Christ. The point is to prepare ourselves, as a human gathering, to be transformed by receiving the Eucharist into something more – a living part of the Body of Christ, animated by His Spirit and filled with His peace.

Third, the celebrant breaks the Bread, as Christ did both at the miracles of the multiplication of the loaves and at their fulfillment at the Last Supper. This, too, is a sign of unity – though we are many, we are made one by sharing in the same Eucharist. The text of the “Lamb of God” remains unchanged, accompanying the action of the breaking of the Bread, a reminder of what is happening at the altar – that all the foreshadowings of salvation and freedom seen in the Exodus and the sacrifice of the Passover lamb are now fulfilled in Jesus, the true Lamb of God Who laid down His life for us.

Fourth, we all pray together from the words of the centurion whose son was healed by Jesus: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” (see Matthew 8:8). This new text is again closer to both the Latin original and its Scriptural source.

Finally, we come, one by one, to receive the Lord in Communion with a sincere and profound “Amen” that this truly is the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ. As each of us is united to Jesus, all of us are made one in Him.

What Happens at Mass? – XX

After Communion, the vessels that have held the Body and Blood of Jesus are purified. This is not just a practical matter but a sign of respect for the true Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. It also gives time for reflection, gratitude, and individual prayer, since we are never as close to Christ in this life as we are immediately after Communion with Him. This prayer may be offered in silence or in a common hymn of thanksgiving; the rite envisions both.

During the purification, the celebrant quietly prays the following, a prayer that helps us understand the significance of this action: *“What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart, that what has been given to us in time may be our healing for eternity.”*

The Prayer after Communion is then offered. While there are many texts proper to each Mass for this prayer, they share the essential themes of thanksgiving for the gift of the Eucharist and an eschatological focus – looking towards eternal life even as we return to our lives here and now.

The Concluding Rites not only complete the Mass but bridge our lives together, week by week. Announcements are made if necessary; the assembly is blessed in the name of the Trinity (just as we began); and then, most importantly, we are sent into the world with the Gospel and the presence of Christ. New texts here underline this more clearly:

- A – Go forth, the Mass is ended.
- B – Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.
- C – Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.
- D – Go in peace.

When Mass is complete, we are not done – we have only just begun.