

The Mass Part 1: The Liturgy of the Word

What is the Mass?

The word “Mass” comes from the final words of the Mass in Latin: “*ita missa est.*” Roughly translated: *Ita* – go (command), *missa* – to send, *est* – is/are. The challenge with translating this phrase is that it contains many Latin nuances. The word “send” is feminine and plural whereas *ita* is a command and plural. Mixing these two ideas together we get “Go all of you, the church is being sent.” These words color the context and value of the Mass. The Mass is the gathering of a group of people who become the Church and are sent to proclaim the message they have heard. On another level, the Liturgy, this act of worship, is the “source and summit of our faith” (*Lumen Gentium* 11). Mass is not simply a gathered people or a religious event. During the Mass Jesus’ Passion and Death which brought us our salvation is made present to us anew. We are brought into the eternal dialogue of love shared between the Father and the Son. We enter into a form of worship given to us by God through which he is made present to us. The Mass is the central act of worship through which we come to know God, his action in the world, our place in his saving acts, and a way to give ourselves back to God.

The Opening Rites:

Each of the four parts of the Mass – the opening rite, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the concluding rite – guide us to understand and join into this celebration of Jesus’ salvation that has come into the world. The opening rites are preparation for the two central parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

When we think about the Mass, we often conclude that we made the choice to come on our own. The people who are present for the celebration of the Mass are called by God. Those who are present are the ones called by God. God invites, we respond. The basic movement in the life of faith is that God always takes the initiative and we respond. The invitation to Mass can come in many forms: a feeling, the guidance of parents and friends, an aspect of prayer such as a feeling of duty, or a deep desire for worship. Regardless we must keep in mind that God always starts the conversation. The Mass is celebrated not done. The verb “to do” encompasses nearly every other verb in today’s common manner of speaking. We do not “do” the Mass or “come” to Mass, but we celebrate. Celebration is active and engaging. The act of celebrating the Mass reminds us that our involvement is active. We take part in this grand event of Jesus’ sacrifice for our salvation, the cause for our celebration.

We start by singing a hymn as the priest walks in with his servers who carry the Cross, candles, the Book of the Gospels, and possibly incense. The incense was a reminder to the people of the ancient world that someone important is entering the area. The Cross is the symbol of new life, the symbol of Christ as though it were his regal insignia reminding us of who is entering this space. The Book of the Gospels is the same as the Cross. We do not simply worship a crucified man, but one who speaks to us constantly because he rose from the dead. The candles show the light of Christ entering the world. The priest celebrant finishes the symbolism and answers the

question, what is going on? The priest also stands as a symbol of Christ uniting and clarifying the other symbols which would beg the question, shouldn't we expect Jesus to come? Indeed he does in the person of the priest. Remember: there is only one Mass. Jesus inaugurated the one Mass at the Last Supper and every other Mass from that point forward is a representation of that one Mass. Therefore only Jesus can properly celebrate the Mass. The priest is his representative. The opening procession, before anything else begins, signifies to us what exactly we are to do: worship with, in, and through Jesus.

The Sign of the Cross: Following the procession, the people, with the priest, make the sign of the Cross together. The Sign of the Cross is the symbolic act that recalls our baptism. Baptism is what brought us into the life of Christ, brought us here today for the celebration of the Mass, and made us worthy to worship God. Thus, we all make the Sign of the Cross together.

The Greeting: many parts of the Mass feel foreign or strange to our modern ears. The greeting is a good example of the complex and often foreign language of the Mass. The words of the "greeting" carry enormous weight in explaining the reason we have gathered and the purpose of the rest of this event. The simple phrase "the Lord be with you" was the standard greeting for anyone who came in the name of God. Angels, prophets, kings, and priests would greet people with this greeting to make the point that God had sent them. Other phrases like "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" come from St. Paul's greetings to the churches. All of these greeting make one point: Jesus is greeting his gathered people in the action of the priest.

The Penitential Rite: Although we know we are God's people called to celebrate the one Mass, the Mass only makes sense if we are people in need of God's mercy. Otherwise the Mass becomes either a placation of an angry God whose wrath we are trying to avoid, the offering of sacrifices to get God's favor, or a ritual of remembrance. We celebrate the Mass to give ourselves to God for the sake of saving the world but also to receive and understand his mercy. Thus we come before God as people who have sinned and are in need of his mercy to fully worship him. The Penitential Rite does simply this: helps us to acknowledge our sins, our need for God, and prepare ourselves to receive his mercy.

The Gloria: after acknowledging our sins and preparing for the celebration of the Mass, we sing a hymn of gratitude recognizing the God who loves us. The Gloria is meant to be a hymn of praise and gladness giving honor, glory, and praise to our God. The Gloria is only sung on Feast and Solemnities except during Advent and Lent. I will cover the liturgical year later in this series.

The Collect: another name for the collect is the Opening Prayer. After the invocation "let us pray," everyone pauses for a moment to prepare to pray. Then the priest says or sings the opening prayer of the Mass called the Collect. As the name implies, the Collect is designed to collect all of our prayers with the one main prayer for all and offer them to the Father. Each Collect is different depending on the Mass. Some are written for specific saints or celebrations like Christmas. Others are drawn from the particular Sunday or season of the year. The prayer generally draws from the readings and season.

The Collect ends the opening rites of the Mass.

The Liturgy of the Word:

The Liturgy of the Word contains four main parts: the readings, the homily, the Profession of Faith, and the Prayers of the Faithful. The Liturgy of the Word can be separated from the Mass. The only difference between a Mass and a celebration of the Word is the Eucharistic Prayer with the consecration of the bread and wine. A Liturgy of the Word doesn't need a priest to celebrate it. A deacon, a professed religious, and even a lay person can preside over Liturgy of the Word services.

The readings: On Sundays and Solemnities five readings are read: the first is from the Old Testament, the second is from the Psalms, the third is from the New Testament letters, the fourth is usually drawn from the Gospel, and the fifth is from one of the Gospels. During weekdays only four readings are read omitting the "second" reading from the New Testament, i.e. the third reading. The first reading from the Old Testament is meant to connect the two Testaments together and to show their continuity. Thus the Gospel passage and the first reading should be connected thematically or build upon one another. During the Easter Season, the first reading is always from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is a sung response to the first reading. This sung response, called the Responsorial Psalm, connects the theme from the first reading or expands upon the theme as we reflect on the reading. The Psalm can be read in the absence of a cantor. The Psalm response is not simply heard by the people present like the other readings, but they take an active part in singing the response as their response to the first reading. The third reading, commonly called the second reading, is always from the New Testament letters. The addition of this third reading only happens on Sundays and Solemnities, major feast days, funerals, weddings, baptisms, and ordinations. Otherwise the Gospel succeeds the Responsorial Psalm. Unlike the connection between the first reading and the Gospel, the New Testament reading is continuous through a book of the New Testament and may connect thematically but not necessarily. The fourth reading is found in the middle of the singing of the Alleluia. The word "alleluia" comes from the Hebrew word "hallel" which means praise and "yia" which is a diminution of Yahweh, hence, Praise God. After singing through the Alleluia, or after repeating the choir's introduction, a small line or two from Scripture is sung to prepare us for understanding and hearing the Gospel proclaimed. Then the Alleluia is repeated. The final reading is the Gospel.

The readings for a specific Sunday follow a three-year cycle appropriately called A, B, and C. Year A focuses on the Gospel of Matthew. Year B focuses on the Gospel of Mark with some drawn from the Gospel of John. Year C focuses on the Gospel of Luke. The 1st reading and third readings change to match the readings for the cycle. The book the second reading is drawn from changes depending on the cycle. The weekday readings have a two-year cycle called year 1 and year 2.

Before each reading is read and after each reading concludes the people hear and respond to the introductory words: "a reading from." The announcement of the reading helps us to remember and connect the books together. It also reminds us that we are not hearing the entirety of the

book but only a part of the book. The response at the end – “thanks be to God” – reminds us that we just heard God speak his word to us. Our response to hearing God’s word should be one of thanksgiving. The Gospel is a little different. The priest greets the people in a way similar to the start of the Mass: “the Lord be with you.” This phrase tells the people that God is speaking now, not simply a reading: God is present in his word. Again the people respond by asking for God’s presence through the ordination of the priest. Then the priest ends the Gospel by saying: “the Gospel of the Lord.” The people respond, “praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.” The priest then kisses the book as a sign of reverence.

The Homily: priests and deacons who preach during the context of a Liturgy (Mass) do not give sermons but homilies. Sermons are addresses preached on a specific topic or with a specific focus. Homilies, conversely, open up the readings read at that Mass and present them for instruction of the people and reflection on the mysteries of God. A good homilist will draw from the readings in new and varied ways instructing the people and helping them to see the deeper connections and apply them to their lives. The best homily ever preached was by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. As the disciples were traveling to Emmaus, Jesus met them and opened all of the Scriptures to them and explained how they pertained to him. This is what a homily is. The homily is an integral part of the Mass. Priests are forbidden to omit the homily on Sundays and Solemnities except for grave reason. On weekdays, the homily can be omitted. The homilies are meant to be short, under 15 minutes, so as not to draw attention away from the rest of the Mass in which the homily derives its value and importance.

The Profession of Faith: also called the Creed, was made an obligatory part of the Mass by Pope Pius IV in 1564 to guide the faithful into knowing and professing the faith and as a response to Protestantism. The Nicene Creed was promulgated by the Council of Nicaea in 325 and became the standard statement of belief for all Christians. The Profession of Faith is only used on Sundays and Solemnities. Either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed may be used at the pastor’s discretion.

The Universal Prayers, aka the Prayers of the Faithful: we often dismiss the importance of this part of the Mass. After hearing the word of God and reflecting upon it, now is our chance to live it and prepare for the next part of the Mass. During the Universal Prayers, the people offer up their prayers for the sake of the world. The order of the prayers are as follows: 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. These should reflect the needs and desire of the people as well as the specific needs at that time in the world.

The Sequences: this rarely used part of the Mass is one of the most disliked and misunderstood. Throughout the year, two sequences are highly encouraged: the Easter Sequence and the Pentecost Sequence. These two prayers reflect on the mysteries celebrated either for Easter or for Pentecost. They come after the third reading, “second reading,” and before the Alleluia is sung. They tend to be long and complicated. Yet, both of these prayers expand upon and emphasize the mysteries and the events we are celebrating.