

THE MASS

Origin of the Mass

When you look at a large painting or listen to a lengthy musical piece, it's often difficult to perceive the whole work of art. You may be attracted to the individual color used in a painting or a bar of melody utilized by a composer. But eventually, as you find yourself growing familiar with the work, you see how each dimension of the piece of art fits together. You begin to see the whole piece of art as a unity.

The Mass itself is akin to a complex work of art. There are various components of the Mass that we may isolate. Processions unfold throughout the liturgy. We see ministers wearing vestments. There are a variety of prayer texts including the Eucharistic prayer, intercessions, and occasions for divine praise. There is the liturgical space which comprises the church building, the altar,

wall paintings, and sculptures. Sacred objects may be used, such as a Book of the Gospels or a crucifix. Music is sung within the space including psalms and hymns, chanted and sung.

The best way to begin to perceive the Mass is, of course, to participate regularly in the celebration. No matter how often you read a book about a particular symphony or famous sculpture, nothing replaces spending time with the work of art. So, too, we pick up the rhythm of the Mass and understand what's happening by attending regularly.

But often it's important to get an overview of a piece of art before experiencing it. If you know to listen to three or five themes in a musical piece, you'll be more likely to benefit from the experience. So, too, we learn to participate in the Mass by understanding where the

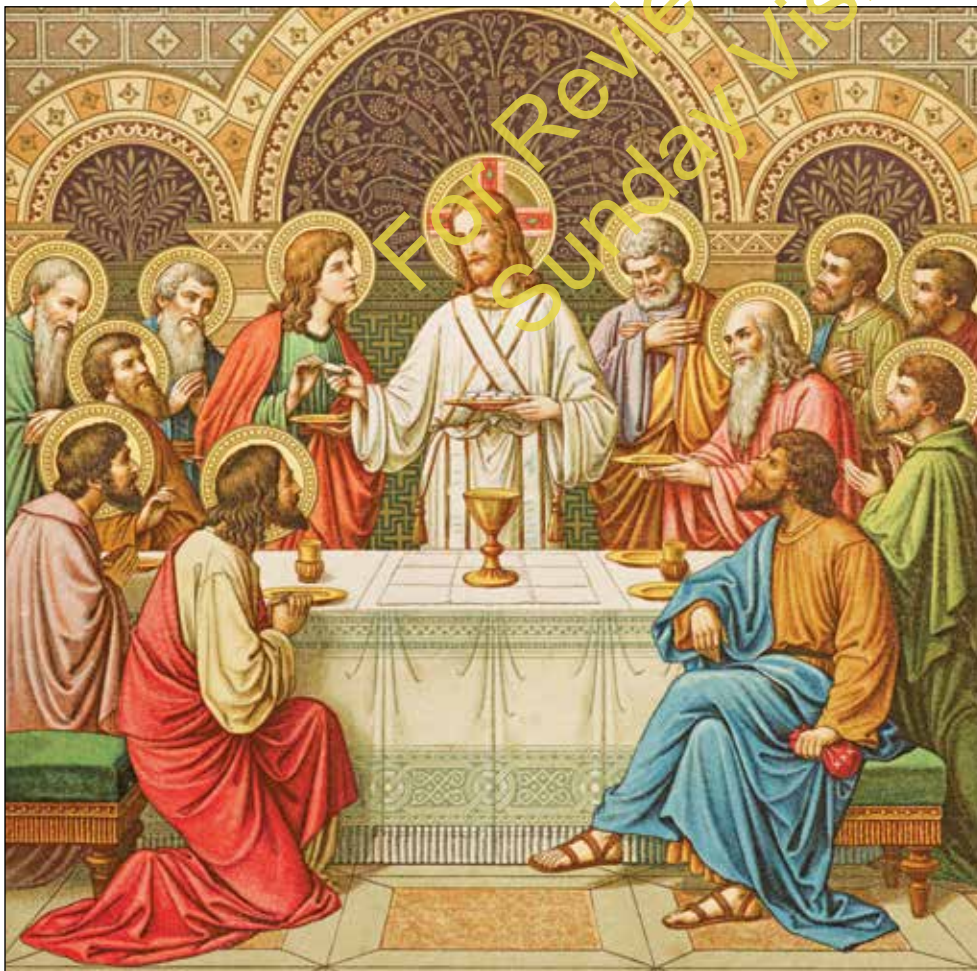
Mass comes from, and ultimately how we can participate in the whole through an encounter with its various parts.

SCRIPTURAL ORIGINS

In many churches, there are stained-glass windows of the Last Supper. Some of these windows depict the Twelve Apostles, wearing vestments, receiving the first Eucharist from Jesus Christ.

These windows — works of art in their own right — illuminate an important dimension of the Mass. The Church's celebration of the Mass finds its basis in Jesus Christ's celebration of the Last Supper. On the night before he died, Jesus Christ celebrated a meal with overtones related to the Passover. In the Book of Exodus, God intervenes in the history of Israel, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. He calls Israel to celebrate a meal, marking their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. God will pass over those homes marked with the blood of a lamb, saving from death the firstborn son therein. Through God's intervention in Exodus, Israel experiences freedom, leaving behind the bondage of Israel for the freedom of the promised land.

Each year, the sons and daughters of Israel are to remember this defining event in their history. To belong to Israel means to begin a covenant with God. God has entered a relationship with the sons and daughters of Israel, thus changing how they are to live. They're to follow the law, to worship God in the Temple, to protect the widow and the orphan, to keep holy the Sabbath, and to celebrate the Passover each year.



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THE PASCHAL SUPPER

As Christ the Lord was about to celebrate with the disciples the paschal supper in which he instituted the Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, he commanded that a large, furnished upper room be prepared (Lk 22:12). Indeed, the Church has always judged that this command also applied to herself whenever she decided about things related to the disposition of people's minds, and of places, rites and texts for the Celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist.

— General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 1

The Passover becomes a living memory of this covenant, remembering before the presence of God the wondrous works God carried out in Egypt. This act of remembering is also a moment of hope. The God who has acted in the past will act once more in the present. God will bring about a New Covenant, as we hear in the Book of Jeremiah, where the law will be written on the human heart. Sons and daughters of Israel will obey God perfectly out of love.

On the night before he died, Jesus celebrated a meal that evoked these dimensions of the Passover. In the Gospels, Jesus breaks bread. He gives wine. And he tells the disciples gathered that the bread that he gives, the wine he offers, is the blood of the New Covenant, which as Christians understand it is sealed in Jesus' death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. When Christians celebrate this meal together, remembering what Jesus Christ accomplished, they receive afresh the gift of this New Covenant. The sacrifice of love becomes present, we eat and drink Jesus' Body and Blood, and we welcome this gift into our very hearts.

HISTORY OF THE MASS

Early Christians celebrated this Eucharistic meal early on. Likely, the earliest celebrations of what would become the Mass took place in the context of evening meals in places like Rome and Jerusalem. We know from Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, that

Christians gathered together each week, on the day of the sun (Sunday), and listened to the Scriptures and celebrated this sacrificial meal.

In the fourth century, the Eucharist moved from private homes or the tombs of martyrs, celebrated in the context of meals, to public spaces. In these public spaces, various parts of the Mass were introduced. There were official texts to be chanted or sung. The Eucharistic prayer was written down. In early Christianity, the Eucharist was celebrated in a variety of ways depending on cultural context. If you've ever attended a Eucharistic Liturgy (properly called Divine Liturgy) celebrated by Eastern-rite Catholics, you have seen that there are a variety of ways of celebrating the Mass. We call these ways of celebrating the Eucharist a "rite." A rite consists of the customary observances attached to a specific style or way of engaging in Christian worship.

The Roman rite itself developed over the course of its history. In medieval Christianity, new prayers and musical compositions were composed for the Mass. There was such diversity that the Council of Trent (1545-63) produced a new liturgical book that helped unify the celebration of the Mass. Up to the twentieth century, the Church continued to develop this liturgy, but the main substance remained the same.

In the nineteenth century, scholars researching the history of the Mass be-

gan to recognize that the Mass from the Council of Trent was preceded by other ways of celebrating the Eucharist. The liturgical movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the benefits of reforming the Mass so that all could better participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore, all should be able to sing the chants, understand the structure of the Eucharistic prayer, and learn to live a Eucharistic life.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Mass was reformed to facilitate this participation in the Eucharist. Today, many of us regularly celebrate this Mass in our parishes. Some communities still celebrate the older form, or what is called the Extraordinary Form of the Mass. But most Catholics throughout the world participate in the Mass according to the Missal of Paul VI (named for Pope Saint Paul VI who was pontiff when the reformed liturgy was promulgated).

MASS AND THE EUCHARIST

The important thing to remember about the various changes in the Mass throughout history is that the core substance has remained the same. At Mass, Catholics encounter Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and especially in his Body and his Blood. The many parts of the Eucharist all contribute to our encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ, preparing us to live out our identities as sons and daughters of the living God.



Outdoor Mass in Roman countryside. Created by Williams, published on L'illustration, Journal Universel, Paris, 1860 - SHUTTERSTOCK

THE MASS

Disposed for Confession

In the Mass, we enter into the New Covenant of love between God and humanity through receiving Christ's Body and Blood. If this is true, why are so many people reluctant to go to Mass? In the United States, participation is so low that it is estimated that only 20 percent of Catholics attend Mass each week!

If you ask many Catholics why they don't go to Mass, they might say something about how they get nothing out of Mass. One response to this confession is to underline that what we get out of Mass is the gift of receiving Christ's Body and Blood.

Still, we have to give a better answer than this (believe it or not). If the Mass was just about receiving Communion, then couldn't it be a lot shorter? Why do we have to sing so many chants

or hymns? Why do the prayers have to be so long? Mass could be over in a matter of minutes.

In fact, the Mass involves a lot more than our reception of Christ's Body and Blood. The Mass is a prayer that forms us as disciples of Jesus Christ. As disciples, we are meant to let every part of our lives become a space where the Word can become flesh. God wants to dwell with us, to enter into union with us.

But if we are to reveal the gift of the Mass, then we must learn to pray the Mass well. Part of it requires that we learn the words of the Mass, the various parts of the Eucharist. But part of it means that we come to the Mass well-disposed to pray.

In prayer, the Church emphasizes the importance of dispositions. If you

"We go to Mass because we are sinners and we want to receive God's pardon, to participate in the redemption of Jesus, in his forgiveness."

— Pope Francis

go to the gym angry, bitter that you have to work out, you're likely not going to benefit as much from the exercise. Similarly, if you don't know the right dispositions to bring to Mass, you might not get much out of the prayers of the Mass.

Learning to pray the Mass well therefore necessitates that we know how to come to Mass disposed to pray.

THE DISPOSITION OF CONFESSION

Saint Augustine wrote a book about God's presence in his life entitled *The Confessions*. For us modern readers, we hear "confession" and likely think only about sin. For Augustine, confession is more robust than this. We confess our sins to God. But we also confess faith. We confess Jesus Christ as Lord, which means that we participate in an act of praise.

Fruitful prayer of the Mass requires us to come to Mass disposed in all three of these aspects of confession. Throughout the Mass, we regularly confess our sins before God. This act of confessing

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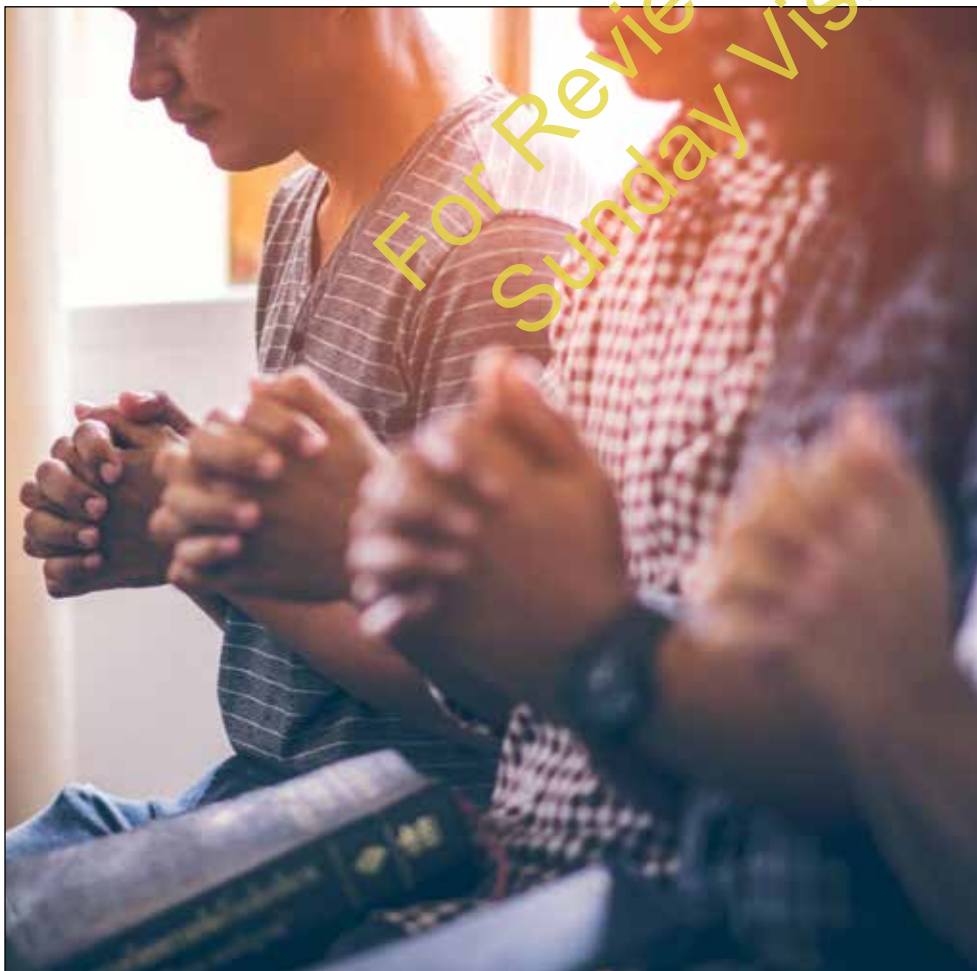
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READY TO LISTEN

The purpose of “the rites that precede the Liturgy of the Word ... is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.”

— General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 46

our sins is not ultimately about feeling guilty for what we’ve done. Rather, it is about recognizing our total reliance on God (and God alone).

Sin, after all, is about forgetting that we belong first and foremost to God. When we lie at work, get angry with our spouse, or ignore our children, we are “confessing” that we are ultimately the “god” of our life. To stand before God and our fellow Catholics, acknowledging our incompleteness, is the beginning of wisdom. It means that we recognize that we are a creature, rather than the creator.

Yet, we must also know something about this God to whom we confess our sins. After all, it’s possible that God is kind of an angry grump like us, looking to hold a grudge. But each week at Mass, we confess that God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the world. What makes God worthwhile is that God is the source of all wisdom, all goodness, and all love. It is this glorious God who became present among us in the person of Jesus Christ, who loved us to the end. Every other God is insufficient. There is but one God.

And this God is all good and all beautiful. That’s why we must learn to praise this God. Praise is not just about singing a song that we like. Instead, it’s a recognition that God alone is God. We remain incomplete until we give everything about ourselves over to Jesus Christ. To praise God, to confess his glory, is the only source of wisdom for a creature.

If we want to be prepared for confession at Mass, then we need to practice it throughout the day. How often do we think about where we’ve missed the mark, turning ourselves into

gods rather than adoring God? How often do I confess the attributes of God, acknowledging God as the source of all wisdom? How often do I interrupt the day through praise, delighting in the wondrous glory of Jesus Christ?

CONFESSING GOD IN THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

The beginning of Mass is when we most fully prepare ourselves to confess ourselves as sinners, to acknowledge the goodness of God, and to praise God as the pinnacle of what it means to be human.

Our first act in confession is to show up to Mass at all! There are a variety of other things that we could be doing, from going to a football game to sleeping in. But by structuring our day around Mass, we’re already proclaiming that God is the only truth of our life. If the secret of life is showing up, so, too, the secret of the Mass is being present.

We also confess God in the introductory rites through several gestures. The priest reverences the altar, kissing it, showing us that the stone (altar) we gather around is not just a table. It is the place where God becomes present, where we receive our identities as children of God. We sign ourselves with the

cross, confessing to all that Jesus Christ is Our Lord.

We confess our sins in the penitential act. There, we acknowledge before God and our brothers and sisters that we are incomplete. And we recognize that the communion of love that we share in the Church is the only way we can be complete. The saints themselves intercede for us.

During all Sundays of the year except during Advent and Lent, we sing an early Christian hymn called the *Gloria in Excelsis*. This hymn prepares us to enter into our vocation as those made to praise God. We can’t get enough of praising God, for God is the source of all glory.

DISPOSED TO CONFESS

Confession of God calls us as Catholics to assume our vocation as creatures made for praise. In our own age, where there is so often the politics of blame and bitterness, we Catholics live in another way. To be fully human means to move away from this monstrous way of living, one where everyone is at fault except ourselves. Instead, we recognize like Saint Augustine that we are incomplete. The only way to be complete is to turn to God, who is the source of all wisdom and love.



THE MASS

The Liturgy of the Word

Have you ever visited one of your former homes, perhaps one that you haven't seen in years? As you walk around the block, memories will surface about your time there, especially if you were a child then. You may remember riding your bike around the street, visiting friends who lived a couple of homes down from your own. The smell in the air may evoke a specific season of the year. You'll remember major events that took place during the time of life you lived in this home.

There's something amazing about the human capacity for recollection. Young children often only need to be told the name of a specific "thing" once or twice before they are able to recall the name on their own. When we reassemble as families during holidays, we're able to remember the many

stories of past holidays. Memory is an extraordinary gift.

THE DISPOSITION OF MEMORY

Even though we have an amazing capacity to remember key events, memory is not just about the ability to recall something, to think about what happened in the past. Memory is also linked to our identity. The memories that we have shape who we are and what we are called to be. When I remember a book that I read, I don't just think about the plot. I think about what I felt as I read the book, what insights were generated in the act of reading, and how my life was changed through the reading. If the book is a work of fiction, I may even think about how this book changed the way that I see myself

or the world through an encounter with the characters in the story.

In praying the Mass, we must come to the celebration with this broader sense of memory. In the end, we Catholics tell the same stories again and again. We remember what God has accomplished in the covenant with Israel. We remember the Incarnation, the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. We remember the lives of the saints, even the hope of the world to come.

We spend so much time remembering because we're learning to see ourselves as part of this story. If you're attentive to contemporary culture, you'll see a lot of stories being told. There's the story that fame and fortune are what makes a human being happy. There's the story that the only human beings that matter are ones who can do something in society. There's the story that we are made for constant work and activity.

The Catholic professes another story. The meaning of the world is not fame or fortune. The human person is not made for efficiency, work, and activity alone. Rather, the human being is made to participate in God's very life. The only story that makes sense of all other stories is God's involvement in our life.

And God is still deeply involved. When we listen to the Scriptures at Mass, we are not just remembering what happened a long time ago, in a land far, far away. We are remembering that Jesus Christ is the one who is fully human and fully divine. He is the one



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NOURISHMENT FOR BELIEVERS

The liturgy of the Word is an integral part of sacramental celebrations. To nourish the faith of believers, the signs which accompany the Word of God should be emphasized: the book of the Word (a lectionary or a book of the Gospels), its veneration (procession, incense, candles), the place of its proclamation (lectern or ambo), its audible and intelligible reading, the minister's homily which extends its proclamation, and the responses of the assembly (acclamations, meditation psalms, litanies, and profession of faith).

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
1154

who was raised from the dead. He is the living Lord!

Therefore, God is still working in our midst this very day. Every part of our lives can be understood through the story that God has told us about himself and ourselves.

For this reason, we have to spend time with this story. Do we read the words of the Scriptures? The lives of the saints? Do we think about the meaning of this story for our lives? Do we spend time in silence before the memory of the Scriptures, allowing the images to enter into the very marrow of our bones?

REMEMBERING GOD

At every Mass, we employ this deeper sense of memory in recalling what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ.

The introductory rites of the Mass conclude with the collect prayer. This prayer brings together the individual prayers of the entire community into one. And this communion is brought about through an act of remembering.

The collect prayer has four parts. First, it begins as addressed to God. We remember, in speaking God's name, that we are children of God, made to address God as our creator and redeemer. Second, the prayer recalls what God has done. God, for the Christian, is not an abstract principle but has become

involved in history. God rescued Israel from slavery, liberated men and women from sin and death through Jesus Christ, and raises up holy men and women throughout the history of the Church.

Third, the collect prayer asks that God act once more after the pattern of what God has accomplished in the past. The God who saved humanity will act even today. Last, the collect prayer concludes with a short phrase in which we ask that our prayer might be heard through the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In this way, we remember in this prayer that even our capacity to pray is first a gift from God, something that God accomplishes through us.

The Liturgy of the Word unfolds at Sunday Mass through the reading of the Scriptures. During most of the year, the first reading is from the Old Testament. This reading will help us reflect more deeply on the Gospel. During Easter, the first reading will be taken from the Acts of the Apostles, describing the early history of the Church. After the first reading, we sing the psalm. The psalm involves the whole Church in reacting to the wondrous works that God has accomplished. We're not passive spectators, listening to a story. We are the ones who have experienced redemption. The second reading is from an epistle or, during Easter, the Book of Revelation. The words of the early Church echo once more in our presence, as the letters addressed to specific communities still generate wisdom for the Church here and now.

Last, we listen to the Gospel. The Book of the Gospels is often presented

with incense and candles. We sing a hymn of praise, crying out Alleluia, praising God who is present among us. The priest will often kiss the Book of the Gospels, asking God's voice to become our own speech. And we hear about the life of Jesus, not as a story from some past time. Instead, Jesus remains fully alive, his speech interrupting our limited vision of what constitutes human happiness. The homily should unfold the meaning of Jesus' words, allowing us to hear the way that Jesus speaks to us here and now.

The profession of faith and the universal prayer are linked to this act of remembering. The profession of faith, the Creed, is a summary of all that the Church believes. Further, it is the very Creed professed at our baptism and our confirmation. These words, which we have written in our very memories, are part of us. And we offer the universal prayer, or intercessions, because having remembered what Christ has accomplished we remember our identity. We are sons and daughters of the living God, meant to intercede for the world.

DISPOSED TO REMEMBER

Catholics have a vocation to remember what Jesus Christ has accomplished. God is not just an absentee creator, who did a couple of things and then disappeared. God is the one who created, redeemed, and now sanctifies the entirety of creation. This narrative, therefore, is not just about what God has accomplished in the past. God is still active here and now. The more that we remember what God has done in the past, the more we will see how God is active in our lives right now.



THE MASS

Liturgy of the Eucharist

As any parent knows, love for our children makes us capable of acts of sacrifice that we never imagined possible. The new parent gives up sleep without a thought, feeding and caring for a newborn through the night. The parent of a teenager will drive hundreds of miles to take his or her child to a sporting event, longing to see the child flourishing in every way possible. Even the long hours that many parents work are acts of sacrificial love. We want our children to have it better than we did, so we work multiple jobs, saving money so that they can attend a school where they can cultivate their gifts.

Now, many parents would never describe these acts of love as sacrifices. Part of this is because we don't always operate with a proper understanding of sacrifice. We tend to think about sacrifice only as an act of pain, something that leads to diminishment rather than true happiness. At Lent, we sacrifice chocolate or television, undertaking a painful process so that we can dedicate ourselves to worshipping God.

But this is a faulty account of sacrifice. Sacrifice is not just about pain. True

sacrifice is really about gratitude, responding with the fullness of ourselves to a gift we have already received.

THE DISPOSITION OF SACRIFICE

Israel performed many sacrifices for God. One of these sacrifices concerned first fruits. Israel would take the first fruits of a harvest and bring it before the priest. The priest would recall the wondrous works God has done in giving to Israel the land.

Or, at least, Israel was supposed to give it away. The problem with sacrifice in a fallen world, one dominated by sin, is that gratitude is often difficult to practice. Israel grew afraid that there weren't going to be other fruits, that the next harvest was never going to come. So, Israel held onto these fruits, not offering the proper sacrifice to God. The flip side of love in a fallen world is stinginess, the desire to control or seize, rather than give.

When Jesus Christ speaks about his life and death as a sacrifice, he's not just talking about his eventual crucifixion, the suffering that he'll endure on Calvary. Rather, Jesus is speaking about

his whole life as a gift of love offered back to the Father. When he was born in Bethlehem, feasted at the wedding of Cana, healed the sick, fed the hungry with bread from heaven, washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, he was returning his entire life as a gift back to God. But human beings did not respond well to this gift of love. They crucified the Son of God because they could not believe this kind of love was possible. They rejected the sacrifice.

This is the wonder of the Cross. Jesus is fully human and divine, as the Church professes. When he is whipped, crowned with thrones, and crucified, it is the God-man who undergoes the worst that humanity can throw at him. But he responds with total, absolute love. And when he is resurrected from the dead, through the power of the Father and the Holy Spirit, we see that absolute love and gratitude defeats even death. Jesus ascends into heaven, marked with these glorified wounds of love. He sits at the right hand of the Father, and now his very body offers this eternal sacrifice of love.

This is what the Church means when she says that the Mass is a participation in Christ's sacrifice. He is now our high priest, interceding before the Father for all humanity. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, it is not just a local community gathering to remember God. Rather, we experience at Mass an entrance into the sacrificial logic of the cross and resurrection. Love, not power and prestige, not stinginess and scarcity, is the meaning of life.

Thus, before we celebrate each



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Mass, we must ask ourselves whether we live according to this logic of sacrifice? Do we instead participate in the reign of sin and death, a stinginess that seeks power above love? How often do we reflect on the life of Christ, seeing the love that the God-man offers to each and every one of us?

GOD'S SACRIFICE IN THE LITURGY

The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. In this sense, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is all that the Church does to prepare us to receive the sacrificial love of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the offering of the gifts. We present bread and wine, the first fruits of the earth, back to God. Bread and wine were used by Jesus at the Last Supper. But bread and wine also represent the wholeness of human life offered back by human beings to God. It is God who created the world for such fertility. And yet men and women have the power to receive this creation, to offer it back to God.

After the offering, the Church begins the great prayer of the Mass, the Eucharistic prayer. While the priest prays this prayer vocally, the entire Church is meant to offer this prayer together.

The Eucharistic prayer begins with a thanksgiving, or preface. Here, we once more recall the wondrous deeds that God has accomplished through Jesus Christ. We focus on a dimension of salvation throughout the year, often praising God for his glorious second coming (as in Advent) or for an opportunity to fast, pray, and give alms (as in Lent).

The prayer continues with the acclamation, the Holy, Holy, Holy, an early Christian hymn that entered the Mass before the second millennium. It involves texts taken from Isaiah, as well as the words used by the crowds in greeting Jesus during his entrance into Jerusalem. In singing this hymn, we recognize that the Eucharist is not just a meal that we celebrate together. Instead, the whole Church enters the heavenly sacrifice of Christ. We're not alone, as the entire communion of angels and saints offer this sacrifice together.

The prayer continues with the

*"Jesus has made himself the
Bread of Life to give us life."
— Saint Teresa of Calcutta*

epiclesis, or the "calling down" of the Holy Spirit. When we celebrate the Mass, it's not our work that is being accomplished, our sacrifice that is the focus. Rather, God is providing us with the very possibility to offer this sacrifice of praise. The bread and wine will be transformed, becoming Christ's Body and Blood through the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, we ask that this Spirit might be present, that God will once more work among us.

The Church then moves into the institution narrative, or consecration. The Sacrament of the Eucharist is based in Jesus' original sacrifice, the new covenant that he brought about through his death and resurrection. When we remember the Last Supper, we're not just focusing on this single moment in the life of Christ. Rather, we're remembering that Jesus instituted this sacramental sacrifice so that we would always have access to the fruits of his love. This is also the moment in which Christ becomes fully present to us. There is no longer bread and wine on the altar, but only Christ's Body and Blood, given to us under the appearance of bread and wine. The same Body that fed the disciples now feeds us!

After a short acclamation of praise, the Eucharistic prayer moves into the anamnesis and oblation. Anamnesis is a Greek word meaning memory. Having remembered the wondrous sacrifice of the God-man Jesus Christ, now present among us, the Church remembers all of Christ's life once more, even his second coming. This is followed immediately

by the oblation, or offering. We have received the presence of infinite love in our midst, the sacrifice of Christ. And now we offer this sacrifice back to the Father. This return-gift is not just for the savoring of the individual. Each of us is to receive the fruits of this communion, such that the Church is brought together in a deeper union of love. Christ's sacrifice, his whole life, should bring us back to live within the communion of the Church.

The Eucharistic prayer reflects this by now moving into a series of intercessions. We pray for deeper union with the pope, the local bishop, the entire Communion of Saints, as well as the living and the dead. Christ's sacrifice has global consequences. We are not meant to live only for one another, but to live in the communion of the Church, a communion that is to transform the whole human family.

The great prayer of the Eucharist concludes with a doxology. Now we once more invoke the Trinity. We began the prayer by entering the sacrificial liturgy of heaven, and we conclude with reference to this eternal sacrifice of love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

SACRIFICE OF LOVE

Over the course of a Catholic's lifetime, they will hear the Eucharistic prayer thousands and thousands of times. But this is not a prayer that we master or grow tired of, because it is through this prayer that we encounter Christ's sacrifice of love, in which we can gradually undertake a restoration of our identity as a creature made for gratitude, for love unto the end, rather than one oriented toward the kind of stinginess that marks so much of contemporary life. We can never tire of the Eucharistic Liturgy, because who tires of love unto the end?



THE MASS

Communion of People

Many large-scale events are designed to elicit an experience of communion. When we go to an NFL or college football game, we experience, for a couple of hours at least, what it means to belong to a collective body. While we might listen to the same music at concerts that we could enjoy in our homes, concerts allow us to enjoy it with a much larger community. Even political rallies or protests allow us to experience what it means to be a resident of the United States. There is singing and dancing, the kind of revelry that brings about the communion of many people.

In each of these events, the communion that is brought about is the work of men and women, not God. Football games bring together the supporters of one team against the other. Concerts provide a moment of escape, before we

find ourselves back in the workaday world, where tens of thousands of our neighbors won't dance with us. Political borders change, and this nation or that nation will likely disappear.

We may long for a communion larger than ourselves, but each of these moments of communion will pass away. They're limited experiences of closeness.

THE DISPOSITION OF COMMUNION

Communion, for this reason, cannot be reducible to a human creation. It must be received always as a gift bestowed by God.

In the final book of the Scriptures, we hear about the communion that human beings are destined to experience. The Book of Revelation, often misread as predicting the future, instead gives

us a vision of a communion that transcends human self-interest. Revelation is a violent book, in which frequent wars break out among members of the city of men.

And yet in the Book of Revelation violence does not have the last word. Throughout, we get a glimpse of the communion that is possible because of the sacrifice of Christ. The Communion of Saints gathers around the Lamb once slain, offering the sacrifice of praise that gives all nations hope. Eventually, it is this sacrifice of praise that will descend from heaven to earth.

Salvation in Revelation is not described as an individual phenomenon, in which each person experiences salvation for him or herself alone. Rather, salvation is experienced in the context of a city, of a common dwelling of men and women among one another, assembled not through a political program but through the blood of the Lamb once slain.

That the Mass is important for experiencing this deeper communion of God and humanity should not be surprising. In the Gospel of John, right after the Last Supper, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment: They are to love one another, just as the Son loves the Father. This love will come as a gift of the Spirit that binds the disciples to one another. The love that Jesus will manifest on the cross, offering it to every man and woman, will also be the glue that binds disciples together in the Church.

Before entering Mass, we must reflect on our capacity for communion.

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Week 4 - Liturgy of the Eucharist

► Week 5 - Communion of People



"If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond 'Amen' ('yes, it is true!') and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, 'the Body of Christ' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true."

— Saint Augustine

Do I enter the celebration of the Mass with a longing for God, desiring not just the fulfillment of an obligation but a deeper communion? Do I love my neighbor, whoever that is, with fervor of heart?

THE COMMUNION RITE

After the Eucharistic prayer, the Church begins the celebration of the Communion rite. Based solely on context, we might see this moment as an occasion to prepare the individual alone to receive Christ's Body and Blood. But this is not sufficient. Rather, it is through this personal reception of Christ's Body and Blood that the Church comes together, remembering once more that she is made to offer this communion of love to the whole human family.

The Church begins the Communion rite by praying the Our Father. The words given to us by Jesus demand that we address God not in the first person singular but plural. God is the Father of the entire human family, who gives each of us our daily bread, and who asks that we dwell together in a communion of love. We are to forgive one another each day, just as God forgives us. To receive divine forgiveness means to offer it to the entire human family.

The sign of peace takes up this call

to communion. The sign of peace is not just a moment to kiss our spouse and children. Instead, the sign of peace is the call to become the communion, the total gift of love, that we are to receive. If we want to receive Christ's love, we must create a space in our hearts for love of the entire human family.

At this point in the Mass, we begin to prepare to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. To sing a hymn to the Lamb of God is an act of faith. What we see on the altar looks like bread and wine. But here is the Lamb of God, who shed his blood for the human family. We are called to a supper, a feast, not ordered toward drunkenness or violence. It is the feast of those who are assembled through the peaceable love of the Lamb once slain.

Of course, none of us are worthy of this love, of this communion that draws us into union with God and with one another. For this reason, we ask that just as Jesus descended into the home of the man incapable of walking, Jesus might enter into our home.

Now, we each receive Christ's Body and Blood. The Church requires that we receive this Body and Blood without sin, not because Jesus can't handle sin. Rather, we are receiving the totality of love, the kind of love that is meant to find a space in the human heart. If we receive this love without awareness of what we're doing, cut off from communion with the Church, then we can't benefit from this gift.

This point of Mass necessitates and requires a bit of silence. This is not the silence of an individual, sitting all by him or herself. Rather, it is a common

silence, the silence of those who reflect together on the gift of love they have received.

We then conclude this moment of silence with a prayer, a blessing, and then are sent off to adore the living God in the world. Having received this gift of communion, we are meant to become this communion to our brothers and sisters in need. For many of us, this need will start right away. It will be our children who demand lunch right after Mass. It will be our spouse inflicted by dementia who needs us to sit in their presence.

For others, we'll need to go to places where such love can be offered. We'll have to work on it, asking for grace from God through further prayer. We'll love the co-worker who is annoying. We'll offer gratitude or forgiveness where it's the hardest.

The communion of the Mass is not meant just to affect us individually. We are called to offer our lives back to God, to make our whole life into a Eucharistic sacrifice.

DISPOSED FOR COMMUNION

In some ways, the reception of Communion is the most intimate moment of the Mass. It is personal, allowing each of us to experience the fruits of Jesus' sacrifice on our very lips. We eat and drink the presence of the living God.

But such communion is not just about an individual experience, an interior delight unfolding apart from the rest of the human family. The Church, having feasted on the Body and Blood of Christ, now become for the world a sacrifice of praise.



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