



The Liturgy—Its Structure and Meaning

As we have been reporting for many weeks in our bulletin, the newly revised Roman Missal will bring several changes to our celebration of the Mass. The most notable changes will be in various prayers and responses we say, such as the Gloria and Nicene Creed. Change is never easy. We must prepare our parish community to be ready for the changes, which begin on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011. The revised Missal gives us a great opportunity to learn more about our sacred liturgy, its history, theology, beauty, and meaning in our lives.

What is the Mass?

It is Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday re-presented in a ritual we have observed for nearly 2,000 years. It takes the shape of a meal. We assemble, sit, talk, tell stories, go to the table, say Grace, share the food, say good-bye, and go home. But it is more than a meal. It is, here and now, Christ actually present among us—in our assembly, in his Word spoken and heard, in the priest presiding, and in the bread and wine we share, made his Body and Blood by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We Assemble--Introductory Rites

The Mass begins with the entrance song. The celebrant and other ministers enter in procession and reverence the altar with a bow and/or a kiss. The altar is a symbol of Christ at the heart of the assembly and so deserves this special reverence.

All make the Sign of the Cross and the celebrant extends a greeting to the gathered people in words taken from Scripture.

At the very beginning of the Mass, the faithful recall their sins and place their trust in God's abiding mercy. The Act of Penitence includes the *Kyrie Eleison*, a Greek phrase meaning, "Lord, have mercy." On Sundays, except during Advent and Lent, the *Gloria* follows. The *Gloria* begins by echoing the song of the angels at the birth of Christ: "Glory to God in the highest!" In this ancient hymn, the gathered assembly joins the heavenly choirs in offering praise and adoration to the Father and Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Then the celebrant invites the gathered assembly to pray and, after a brief silence, proclaims the prayer of the day.

We Tell Stories--Liturgy of the Word

Most of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of readings from Scripture. During most of the year, the first reading is from the Old Testament and the second reading is from one of the New Testament letters. The Responsorial Psalm is sung between the readings. The psalm helps us to meditate on the Word of God. The high point of the Liturgy of the Word is the last reading--the Gospel. Because the Gospels tell of the life, ministry, and preaching of Christ, it receives several special signs of honor and reverence. We stand to hear the Gospel and it is introduced by an acclamation of praise--"*Alleluia!*" ("Praise the Lord!" in Hebrew). The Scriptures *are* the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the Scriptures, God speaks to us now here and now.

After the Gospel, the celebrant preaches the homily, drawing from the readings lessons that may help us to live better lives, more faithful to Christ's call to grow in holiness.

We then together make our Profession of Faith by reciting the Nicene Creed from the 4th Century. The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the Prayer of the Faithful or the General Intercessions. The gathered assembly intercedes with God on behalf of the Church, the world, and themselves, entrusting their needs to the faithful and loving God.

The Meal--Liturgy of the Eucharist

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the preparation of the gifts and the altar. As the ministers prepare the altar, representatives of the people bring forward the bread and wine that will become the Body and Blood of Christ. The celebrant blesses and praises God for these gifts and

places them on the altar. Gifts for the support of the Church and the care of the poor may be brought forward.

After the gifts and altar are prepared, the Eucharistic Prayer begins. In this prayer of thanksgiving, the celebrant acts in the person of Christ as head of his body, the Church. He gathers not only the bread and the wine, but the substance of our lives and joins them to Christ's perfect sacrifice, offering them to the Father.

The Preface tells of the wonderful actions of God, both throughout history and in our lives, giving thanks to God for all these things. It concludes with the *Sanctus* in which the whole assembly joins the song of the angels giving praise to the Father in heaven—"Holy, holy, holy Lord!"

In the *epiclesis*, the priest asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine so that, through the power of the Spirit, they may become the Body and Blood of Christ. This same Spirit will transform those attending the liturgy that they may grow in their unity with each other, with the whole Church, and with Christ.

The prayer continues with the institution narrative and consecration. This part of the prayer recalls the action of Jesus Christ on the night before his death. In the course of a final meal with his disciples, he took the simple bread and wine, blessed them, and gave them to his friends as his Body and Blood. In our Eucharistic celebration, through the words of the priest and the action of the Holy Spirit, simple bread and wine once again become the Body and Blood of Christ.

The next part of the prayer is the offering. The priest joins the offering of this Mass to the perfect sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. The priest offers this sacrifice back to God the Father in thanksgiving for God's abundant gifts, particularly the gift of salvation in Christ. The priest also prays that the Holy Spirit may come upon the faithful and by receiving the body and blood of Christ, they themselves may become a living offering to God.

The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with the Final Doxology. The celebrant makes the prayer through, in, and with Jesus, in union with the Holy Spirit, and presents it to God the Father. The people

respond with the Great Amen – a joyous affirmation of their faith and participation in this great sacrifice of praise.

Communion follows. The Communion Rite begins with the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples when they asked how to pray. In this prayer, the people join their voices to pray for the coming of God's kingdom and to ask God to provide for our needs, forgive our sins, and bring us to the joy of heaven.

The celebrant then prays that the peace of Christ will fill our hearts, our families, our Church, our communities, and our world. As a sign of hope, the people extend to those around them a sign of peace, typically by shaking hands.

In the Fraction Rite, the celebrant breaks the consecrated bread as the people sing the *Agnus Dei* or "Lamb of God." John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The action of breaking the bread recalls the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, when he broke the bread before giving it to his disciples. One of the earliest names for the Eucharistic celebration is the breaking of the bread.

The people approach the altar and, bowing with reverence, receive Communion. The priest or other minister offers the Eucharist to each person saying, "The Body of Christ. The person receiving responds by saying, "Amen," a Hebrew word meaning, "So be it." The Communion Rite ends with the Prayer after Communion, which asks that the benefits of the Eucharist will remain active in our daily lives.

We Depart--Concluding Rites

The celebrant then blesses the people assembled "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It is in the triune God and in the sign of the cross that we find our blessing. We are then dismissed--"Go, the Mass is ended." At one time, the people were dismissed with the words "*Ite, missa est*," meaning "Go, you are sent." *Missa* (which gave us the word Mass) comes from the word *missio*, the root of the English word "mission." The liturgy does not simply come to an end. Those assembled are sent forth to bring the fruits of the Eucharist to the world.