

Understanding the Mass: Overview and Introductory Rites

- I. The Mass is the center of life for all Catholic Christians. It is so rich an experience that we can never fully comprehend it, but we can always learn more about it so we may draw closer to the Lord and each other and grow deeper in our spiritual bond with the Lord, one another, and all of creation.

When Catholics are asked where Christ is present at Mass, the usual answer is “in the consecrated bread and wine.” This would be a correct answer, but an incomplete answer. Actually, Christ is present in four different ways during the Mass. Today, we will explore the first major way we initially experience Christ’s presence at Mass: in the community at prayer.

St. Matthew recounts when Jesus taught his disciples this important truth: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (Mt. 18:20). The introductory rites of the Mass serve to form a sea of individuals into a community. As we celebrate the introductory rites of the Mass and reconstitute ourselves as a community, Christ is among us.

As Christ comes among us as we reconstitute ourselves as a community, we prepare ourselves in the introductory rites to engage at 3 tables critical for our lives: 1) the table of God’s Word, 2) the table of the Eucharist, and 3) the tables of the world we are sent to serve. These tables will be explored in the next three presentations.

I. Introductory Rites of the Mass: The Structure:

A. General Comments:

1. Mass actually begins informally from the time we arrive on campus until the Mass formally begins. Our hospitality breaks down barriers and helps us connect. Primes our pumps.
2. Prepares the community for the Liturgy of the Word, for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and beyond.

B. Entrance Song:

1. Purpose: To open the celebration, foster unity among those gathered, introduce people to what they are celebrating, accompany the ministerial procession
2. Singing at Mass on Sunday is normative because it is 1) a form of worshiping God and 2) a way to unify the community (even those whose best gift is to make a joyful noise to the Lord!)

C. Veneration of the Altar:

1. Likely origin: kissing the table in cultures where every meal was considered sacred (something to think about in modern culture where we no longer perceive any meal as sacred, a gift from God to us). As the table came to be constructed of stone, it began to be looked upon as a symbol of Christ, the cornerstone and spiritual rock of the Church. With the growth of martyrs, other saints, and their veneration, their relics were placed beneath the altar and the kiss was seen as a greeting of the saints (A relic of St. Francis is beneath ours.)
2. Placing the Book of Gospels on the altar: a way of connecting the altar, a symbol of Christ, and the Gospels, which contain the words of Christ.

3. Bowing/Genuflecting to the altar upon arriving at one's pew: a way for everyone to reverence the presence of Christ in the church: if tabernacle is in clear view of people, a genuflection is made because the Eucharistic Christ himself is present there; if tabernacle is not visible, a bow to the altar is made to the altar as a symbol of Christ.

D. Sign of the Cross and Greeting:

1. We make the sign of the cross as a conscientious declaration that this sign of contradiction has become our boast (an instrument of death has become the means to eternal life) as we celebrate again Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross that will become present in the Holy Eucharist.
2. The greeting comes from an ancient dialogue between presider and people; meant to announce and wish that the people actually experience the presence/power of the Lord in the community they are now forming anew. It's not simply a "churchy" way to say "Good morning/evening."

E. Penitential Act:

1. Serves as a preliminary reminder that we come to any Mass as imperfect people always in need of God's love and mercy which God gladly offers to those with contrite hearts. The "I confess" option focuses on a confession of sin whereas the other options offer praise for God's mercy. Both are appropriate.
2. The prayer of absolution does not absolve sin. It's preparatory for the true gift of forgiveness of venial sins that radiates from the table/altar and is granted in the reception of Holy Communion.

F. Glory to God:

1. A very ancient and venerable hymn in which the Church glorifies and praises God the Father and the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ). Emphasizes the festive character of Masses on Sundays/feasts.

G. Collect:

1. This serves as a conclusion to the Introductory Rites and not as an opening prayer because the community has been praying already!
2. After the priest says "Let us pray," the community is invited to lift up any prayers/petitions they are bringing to Mass that day during the silence that follows these words.
3. Then the priest voices a prayer to God that gathers all these prayers/petitions into one united prayer to the Lord.

RESOURCES:

Irwin, Kevin W. *Liturgy, Prayer, and Spirituality*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1984.

Johnson, Lawrence J. *The Mystery of Faith*, revised edition. Washington: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 2006.

Turner, Paul. *At the Supper of the Lamb*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2010.