

A Walk Through the Mass

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Whenever we experience a change in our cherished rituals it is a matter of concern. And as the Eucharist is our most cherished religious ritual—the very source and summit of our faith—any change in the way we celebrate the Eucharist will naturally produce a certain amount of anxiety.

Rituals, by their very nature, tend to be fixed and unchanging. Think of the rituals in our daily lives: There are set ways of shaking hands, eating with a fork, responding to a letter. And when we are accustomed to a certain way of doing things we seldom ask why we do it that way.

In the Eucharist, too, we have many ritual actions which we perform over and over without asking why. And when some of these rituals change—as they have at various times throughout the history of the Church—the anxiety that these

changes might cause can be alleviated by looking carefully at the elements of the ritual that didn't change.

In this *Catholic Update* we will “walk through” the ritual prayers and actions of the Eucharist to examine why we do what we do at Mass. I think these explanations will be helpful for the



BY THOMAS RICHSTATTER, O.F.M.

great numbers of Roman Catholics who attend Mass regularly but don't always remember the reasons behind the various actions of the Mass. They may be especially helpful for catechumens (those preparing to enter the Catholic Church) and visitors from other churches who are not familiar with the Catholic Church.

What is the Mass?

The core of the Eucharist never changes. The Mass is Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council brought together these three mysteries in a multifaceted description of the Mass recalling the Last Supper, the sacrifice of the Cross, and Easter Sunday.

But the Mass is not merely a meal which reminds us of the Last Supper, or a Passion play which helps

recall Good Friday, or a Sunrise service which celebrates the Lord's resurrection. In the Eucharist, when we recall these mysteries of redemption, “the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present in every age in order that the faithful may lay



CNS PHOTOS: 1 AND 2, NANCY WIECHEG; 3, DON DOLLE, SJ

hold of them and be filled with saving grace” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #102). At every Eucharist, in a real yet mystical way, we become present to these central mysteries of our Faith.

“At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice...” The events of Holy Thursday give us the key for understanding the “shape” of our eucharistic ritual.

What do we do at a formal meal? We gather with our family and friends, we talk and share our stories, and then we move to the table. The food is brought to the table, we say grace, and we pass the food and eat and drink. Finally, we take our leave and return to our homes. The Mass has these same four movements: 1) Gathering, 2) Storytelling, 3) Meal sharing and 4) Commissioning.

In a sense, the Gospel of Luke walks us through the Mass in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The disciples are walking along and the stranger catches up to them; 1) they gather together; 2) they tell their story and recall the Scriptures; 3) they recognize him in the “breaking of bread” and 4) they dash back to Jerusalem to share their joy with the other disciples. Notice the same four movements: Gathering, Storytelling, Meal sharing and Commissioning. Let’s take a closer look at each in turn.

PART ONE Gathering rites

Coming together, assembling, is at the heart of our Sunday worship. The reason behind each of the ritual actions of the first part of the Mass can be found in this word: gathering. The purpose of these rites is to bring us together into one body—the Body of Christ—ready to listen to God’s word and to break bread together.

■ **GREETERS.** In many churches today there will be someone at the door to greet you as you arrive for Sunday Mass: We all like to be greeted and welcomed when we gather for a celebration. If the greeters (and we all should serve this function for one another) recognize that you are new to the parish, they will give you a special hello and be sure that you have the service books (or missalette or hymnal) and participation aids necessary to pray well with the assembly.

■ **USE OF WATER.** One of the first things Catholics do when they come to church is dip their right hand in water and make the Sign of the Cross. This ritual is a reminder of our Baptism: We were baptized with water and signed with the cross. At every Mass we renew our promises to die to sin. The Eucharist begins in Baptism; it is Baptism that brings us to Church.

■ **GENUFLECTION.** In medieval Europe, it was a custom to go down on one knee (to genuflect) before a king or person of rank. This secular mark of honor gradually entered the Church, and people began to genuflect to honor the altar and the presence of Christ in the tabernacle before entering the pew.

Today, many people express their reverence with an even older custom and bow to the altar before taking their place.

■ **POSTURE, SONG.** When the Mass begins, everyone stands up. Standing is the traditional posture of the Christian at prayer: It expresses our attentiveness to the word of God and our readiness to carry it out.

Often we begin by singing together. What better way to gather than to unite our thoughts and our voices in common word, rhythm and melody.

■ **GREETING.** The priest will ask us to begin with the sign of the cross, again reminding us of Baptism, and will greet us, saying, “The Lord be with you.” You

will hear this greeting frequently. It means many things. Like “good day,” it can mean both “hello” and “good-bye.” It is both a wish (May the Lord be with you) and a profound statement of faith (As you assemble for worship, the Lord is with you).

It is an ancient biblical greeting: Boaz returned from Bethlehem (we read in the Book of Ruth 2:4) and said to the reapers, “The Lord be with you!” The ritual response to this greeting is the formula, “And with your spirit,” by which we return the hello, the good wishes, the statement of faith.

■ **PENITENTIAL ACT, GLORIA.** All the other ritual acts of this first part of the Mass are intended to gather us together into a worshiping assembly. Sometimes we are asked to pause and recall our common need for salvation (the Penitential Act). Sometimes the hymn “Glory to God in the highest” is sung or recited at this point. The “Gloria” has been a part of the Mass since about the sixth century! These longer hymns and responses are found in the service book (or prayer card) at our seat.

■ **COLLECT PRAYER.** At the close of this first part of the Mass the priest will ask us to join our minds in prayer, and after a few moments of silence he will collect our intentions into one prayer to which we all respond “Amen,” a Hebrew word for “So be it.”

PART TWO Storytelling

LITURGY OF THE WORD. When we gather at a friend’s home for a meal, we always begin with conversation, telling our stories. At Mass, after the rites of gathering, we sit down and listen as readings from the Word of God are proclaimed. They are the stories of God’s people—they are our story.

■ **THREE READINGS AND A PSALM.** On Sundays there are three readings from the Bible. The first reading will be from the Hebrew Scriptures. We recall the origins of our covenant. It will relate to the Gospel selection and will give background and insight into the meaning of what Jesus will do in the Gospel.

Then we will sing or recite a psalm—a song from God’s own inspired hymnal, the Book of Psalms. The second reading will usually be from one of the letters of Paul or another apostolic writing. The third reading will be taken from one of the four Gospels.

■ **STANDING FOR THE GOSPEL.** Because of the unique presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel, it has long been the custom to stand in attentive reverence to hear these words. We believe that Christ “is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #7).

The priest will again greet us with “The Lord be with you.” He then introduces the Gospel reading while marking a small cross on his forehead, lips and heart with his thumb while praying silently that God cleans his mind and his heart so that his lips may worthily proclaim the Gospel. In many places, the congregation performs this ritual action along with the priest.

The Gospel reading concludes with the ritual formula “The Gospel of the Lord” and we respond, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ,” again proclaiming our faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Word. Then we sit for the homily.

■ **HOMILY.** The Homily is more than a sermon or a talk about how we are to live or what we are to believe. The Homily is an act of worship rooted in the texts of the Mass and especially in the readings from Scripture which have just been proclaimed. The Homily takes the Biblical word and applies it to our life situation today. Just as a large piece of bread is broken to feed individual persons, the Word of God must be broken open so it can be received and digested by the congregation.

■ **CREED.** The homily is often followed by a few moments of silence during which we each thank God for the Word we have heard and apply the message of today’s readings to our daily living. We then stand and together recite the Creed. (You will probably want to use the service book or pew card for the text

of the Creed until you know it by heart.)

The Creed is more than a list of things which we believe. It is a statement of our faith in the Word we have heard proclaimed in the Scripture and the homily, and a profession of the faith that leads us to give our lives for one another as Christ gave his life for us. Originally the Creed was the profession of faith of those about to be baptized at this point in the Mass.

■ **GENERAL INTERCESSIONS.** The Liturgy of the Word (our “storytelling” part of the Mass) comes to an end with the General Intercessions.

The General Intercessions help us become who God is calling us to be. We are the Body of Christ by Baptism. Now, as we prepare to approach the table for Eucharist, we look into the readings, like a mirror, and ask: Is that who we are? Does the Body of Christ present in this assembly resemble that Body of Christ pictured in the Scripture readings? Usually not! And so we make some adjustments; we pray that our assembly really comes to look like the Body of Christ—a body at peace, with shelter for the homeless, healing for the sick, food for the hungry.

We pray for the Church, nations and their leaders, people in special need and the local needs of our parish—the petitions usually fall into these four categories. A minister will announce the petitions, and we are usually given an opportunity to pray for the intentions in our heart, then make some common response aloud like, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

PART THREE Meal sharing

After the readings, we move to the table. As at a meal in the home of a friend, we 1) set the table, 2) say grace and 3) share the food (we eat and drink). At Mass, these

ritual actions are called 1) the Preparation of the Gifts, 2) the Eucharistic Prayer and 3) the Communion Rite.

■ **PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS.** The early Christians each brought some bread and wine from their homes to the church to be used for the Mass and to be given to the clergy and the poor. Today a similar offering for the parish and the poor is made with our monetary contributions. Members of the parish bring these offerings to the altar with the bread and wine to be used for the sacrifice.

The priest places the bread and wine on the table. He then mixes water with the wine and washes his hands. (Mixing water with wine and washing hands are things all Jews did at meals in Jesus’ time; today they remind us of the origins of the Eucharist at a Jewish meal.)

Finally, the priest invites us to pray that the sacrifice may be acceptable to God. We respond “Amen” to the Prayer over the Offerings and stand to participate in the central prayer of the Mass.

■ **THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER.** The long prayer which follows brings us to the very center of the Mass and the heart of our faith. While the words of the prayer may vary from Sunday to Sunday, the prayer always has this structure: 1) We call upon God to remember all the wonderful saving deeds of our history. 2) We recall the central event in our history, Jesus Christ, and in particular the memorial he left us on the night before he died. We recall his passion, death and resurrection. 3) After gratefully calling to mind all the wonderful saving acts God has done for us in the past, we petition God to continue those deeds of Christ in the present. We pray that we may become one body, one spirit in Christ.

■ **INVITATION.** The prayer begins with a dialogue between the leader and the assembly. First, the priest greets us with “The Lord be with you.” He then asks if we are



ready and willing to approach the table and to renew our baptismal commitment, offering ourselves to God: "Lift up your hearts." And we say that we are prepared to do so: "We lift them up to the Lord." We are invited to give thanks to the Lord our God. And we respond: "It is right and just."

To "give thanks" translates the traditional Greek verb which now names the whole action: Eucharist.

■ **PREFACE AND ACCLAMATION.** The priest enters into the Preface, a prayer which prepares us to come before the face of God. We are brought into God's presence and speak of how wonderful God has been to us. As the wonders of God are told, the assembly cannot hold back their joy and sing aloud: "Wow! Wow! Wow! What a God we have!" In the ritual language of the Mass, this acclamation takes the form of "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of hosts. / Heaven and earth are full of your glory."

■ **INSTITUTION NARRATIVE: CONSECRATION.** The priest continues the prayer, giving praise and thanks, and calling upon the Holy Spirit to change our gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. He then recalls the events of the Last Supper—the institution of the Eucharist.

At this important moment in the prayer, we proclaim the mystery of faith. Several texts are possible, for example: "We proclaim your Death, O Lord, / and profess your Resurrection / until you come again." The priest continues recalling the wonderful deeds of salvation: the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

■ **PRAYER FOR UNITY AND INTERCESSIONS.** The grateful memory of God's salvation leads us to make a bold petition, our main petition at every Eucharist: We pray for unity. "Humbly we pray / that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, / we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

To this petition we add prayers for the bishop of Rome and for the bishop of the local Church; we pray for the living and the dead and especially for ourselves, that through the intercession of the saints we may one day arrive at that table in heaven of which this table is only a hint and a taste.

We look forward to that glorious day and raise our voices with those of all the saints who have gone before us as the priest raises the consecrated bread and wine and

offers a toast, a doxology, a prayer of glory to God in the name of Christ: "Through him, and with him, and in him, / O God, almighty Father, / in the unity of the Holy Spirit, / all glory and honor is yours, / for ever and ever." Our "Amen" to this prayer acclaims our assent and participation in the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

■ **THE COMMUNION RITE: OUR FATHER AND SIGN OF PEACE.** We prepare to eat and drink at the Lord's table with those words taught us by Jesus: "Give us this day our daily bread, / and forgive us our trespasses, / as we forgive those who trespass against us." Keenly aware that communion (the word means "union with") is the sign and source of our reconciliation and union with God and with one another, we make a gesture of union and forgiveness with those around us and offer them a sign of peace.

■ **INVITATION TO COMMUNION.** The priest then shows us the Body of Christ and invites us to come to the table: "Behold the Lamb of God....Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." The members of the assembly now approach the altar in procession.

■ **COMMUNION.** As God fed our ancestors in the desert on their pilgrimage, so God gives us food for our journey. We approach the minister who gives us the eucharistic bread with the words "The Body of Christ," and we respond, "Amen." We then go to the minister with the cup who gives it to us with the words "The Blood of Christ," to which we again profess our "Amen."

During this procession we usually sing a hymn which unites our voices, minds and thoughts, as the Body and Blood of Christ unites us into the Body of Christ. Then we pray silently in our hearts, thanking and praising God and asking for all that this sacrament promises. The priest unites our prayers in the Prayer after Communion, to which we respond, "Amen."

PART FOUR Commissioning

A **NNOUNCEMENTS.** Finally we prepare to go back to that world in which we will live for the coming week. Strengthened by this Eucharist, we are better prepared to take up the burdens of our daily lives.

There may be announcements at this time which remind us of important activities

coming up in the parish. The priest again says, "The Lord be with you"—the ritual phrase serves now as a farewell.

■ **BLESSING AND DISMISSAL.** We bow our heads to receive a blessing. As the priest names the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we make the Sign of the Cross. The priest or deacon then dismisses the assembly: "Go in peace." And we give our liturgical "yes" by saying, "Thanks be to God."

■ **LIVING THE EUCHARIST IN THE WORLD.** We leave the assembly and the church building—but we carry something with us.

What happens in our lives during the week gives deeper meaning to the ritual actions we have celebrated at Mass, whether it's family, work with poor or just plain work. It is only in relation to our daily lives that the full meaning of the ritual actions of the Mass becomes clear to us. ■

Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., has a doctorate in theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris. He teaches sacramental and liturgical theology at Saint Meinrad (Indiana) Seminary and School of Theology.

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UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) How is the Mass like a family meal?
- 2) What does the story of Emmaus tell us about Mass?
- 3) How important are rituals in your life?

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