

THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY

PART I OF 5

JANUARY 26, 2020

In this series, we're going to delve deeper into the Mass—our daily prayer, our weekly worship, the most familiar as well as the most profound of Christian rituals. As we begin, we'll look at what liturgy is and explore the Introductory Rites of the Mass. Over the course of this series, our purpose will be to uncover ways to pray the Mass more deeply and intentionally.

THE MASS BEGINS

What is liturgy?

Liturgy comes from a Greek term that means “work of the people” or “public work” and is used in many different contexts, mostly religious. For Catholics, “liturgy” refers to the formal worship offered by the Church and includes the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, celebrations of the sacraments, rites, and blessings.

The definition of liturgy as “work” is worth pondering. Catholic isn't just something we are—Catholic is something we *do*. Faith is not passive, but something to be lived. When we gather for the liturgy, we are doing something: we are uniting our prayer with that of others, not only those in the pews with us, but with the Church throughout the world, throughout time, and throughout history. The ordered and repeated patterns of the liturgy allow us to enter into the tradition of the Church and to touch the mystery of faith. Through the liturgy, we are being built into a community, one Body in Christ.

The “work” of the liturgy is carried out, first and foremost, by Christ himself. It is Christ who gathers the community together, Christ who fills and gives meaning to the rites and makes them fruitful. Christ works with and through us when we come together to celebrate the Church's liturgy. There are many different roles and functions: readers, cantors and musicians, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, ushers and greeters, altar servers, deacons, and priests, sometimes a bishop or archbishop as well—and members of the assembly. Each of these has a function to perform in the carrying out of the liturgy. When we all come together for the liturgy, we are more than a crowd attending a public event—a concert, sporting event, or lecture. We are not spectators, but a worshiping assembly, being formed, through the presence of Christ, into the very body of Christ.



So what is liturgy? Liturgy is God gathering people together to offer worship. Liturgy follows patterns, many of which are extremely ancient. Liturgy requires a diversity of people performing a variety of functions. Liturgy speaks many languages—the languages of movement, sound, silence, gesture, and symbol as well as spoken language. Liturgy employs many different art forms—music, poetry, architecture, and rhetoric, among others. In short, liturgy does not exist on paper. Liturgy is something that happens, when a community gathers to pray.

The Introductory Rites

Mass begins with a procession, as the ministers of the liturgy enter the worship space. The procession is practical (those with particular roles to perform in the liturgy need to get into the sacred space somehow!) but, more importantly, the procession is symbolic of the gathering of the people of God around the cross of Christ. In Eucharistic Prayer III, the priest prays: “Listen graciously to the prayers of this family whom you have summoned before you.” That phrase tells us two remarkable things: first, that we are a family. Since we are all children of God by adoption, we are brothers and sisters to each other. And second: we didn't decide to come to Mass on our own. We were “summoned.” In other words, every time we come to Mass, it's not so much a decision as a response to the invitation of God. The procession is a visual reflection of this invitation, as the ministers are drawn into the space following the cross. The song we sing at the entrance expresses praise of God. The simple act of singing together both expresses and reinforces the reality that we are family,

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

we are a community together.

In the procession, we honor the presence of Christ. Candles are carried with the cross and the Book of the Gospels, both of which point to Christ. At the end of the procession, the priest kisses the altar because, in the words of the early Church Fathers, “the altar is Christ.”

After the entrance, the introductory rites of the Mass unfold with four prayers. We begin with the Sign of the Cross: *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. This is a profession of faith in miniature, a reminder of who we are and in whose name we gather. The sign of the cross marks the beginning and the end of the Mass, of this time consecrated to God.

The Penitential Act which follows is a public acknowledgment of sin. When, in one of his first public interviews, Pope Francis was asked who he was, he replied, “I am a sinner. This the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.” We acknowledge our sinfulness not so that we can feel bad about ourselves. We acknowledge our sinfulness because it reminds us of our need for God. How can we recognize God’s power without recognizing our own weakness? We acknowledge our sins so that we can praise God, the source of forgiveness: “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” This pattern—sin and mercy; humanity and divinity—will be repeated many times in the course of the Mass. We acknowledge who we are so we can, as the saying goes, “let God be God.”

That pattern is reflected in the Gloria, the song of praise which is sung on Sundays (except in Advent and Lent), Feasts, and Solemnities. The Gloria is an ancient song which begins with the words of the angels to the shepherds on Christmas night: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” The rest of the Gloria is an ancient “riff,” if you will, on those words of Scripture, a rhapsody of praise which almost seems to exhaust the vocabulary of praise and thanksgiving: “We praise you. We bless you. We adore you. We glorify you. We give you thanks.”

Following the Gloria, the Introductory Rites of the Mass conclude with the opening prayer, called a “Collect” because it gathers or “collects” the prayers of the assembly into one. The Collect always includes a specific petition, sometimes for the community gathered, sometimes much broader: “that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ” (First Sunday of Lent); “that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule” (8th Sunday); “that... we may rise up in the light of life” (Easter Sunday). With this prayer, the Introductory Rites come to an end. The entire assembly sits to listen to the Word of God.

The Spirit of the Liturgy

Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, was the first document to emerge from the Second Vatican Council. This document is full of teachings which have become familiar over the years: liturgy is “source and summit,”



and we are called to participate in the liturgy “fully, consciously, and actively.” Less familiar is the phrase, used no fewer than three times in the document, “deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy.” This is said with regard both to priests and to laypeople who assist with the liturgy. What is “the spirit of the liturgy”? And what would it mean for us to be “imbued with the spirit of the liturgy?” Looking at the Introductory Rites of the Mass, we can answer that question in this way: the spirit of the liturgy is entering into community. The spirit of the liturgy is wonder and awe in the presence of God. The spirit of the liturgy is humility and joy.

As our exploration of the Mass unfolds over the coming weeks, we’ll add new layers to our answer to this question.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

A Prayer before Mass

O God, my God,
Mass is about to begin.
You have called me to be part of this liturgy:
you want me to be here today.
Help me to enter into the Mass
with heart, mind, and voice:
with my whole self.

Around me are the others you have called:
not strangers, but my family in faith.
Help me to recognize your presence in them.
May we honor each other’s gifts,
put up with each other’s weaknesses,
treasure our unity and rejoice in our diversity.
As we celebrate Mass together,
may we truly become what we receive:
the Body of Christ for a world in need.
Amen.