

MEETING CHRIST: EXPLORING THE LITURGY

PART I OF 5

SEPTEMBER 11, 2022

In this series, we will delve into the Mass—our daily prayer, our weekly worship, the most familiar and the most profound of Christian rituals. To begin, we'll look at what liturgy is and explore the Introductory Rites of the Mass. Through this 5-part series, our purpose will be to uncover ways to pray the Mass more deeply and intentionally.

LITURGY: PLACE OF ENCOUNTER



Do you want to meet Jesus?

Pope Francis has written, “if we had somehow arrived in Jerusalem after Pentecost and had felt the desire not only to have information about Jesus of Nazareth but rather the desire still to be able to meet him, we would have had no other possibility than that of searching out his disciples so that we could hear his words and see his gestures, more alive than ever.... That which was visible in Jesus, that which could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, his words and gestures, the concreteness of the incarnate Word—everything of Him had passed into the celebration of the sacraments.” (*Desiderio Desideravi*, 9). In other words, liturgy is the place of encounter. Liturgy is where we meet Christ. In fact, Pope Francis says, “The Liturgy *guarantees* for us the possibility of such an encounter” (11, emphasis added).

Liturgy comes from a Greek term that means “work of the people” or “public work.” 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; faith is lived. Through the ordered and repeated patterns of the liturgy, we enter into the tradition of the Church and touch the mystery of faith.

But the true “work” of the liturgy is what God does. (Saint Benedict referred to liturgy as *opus Dei*, work of God!) It is Christ who gathers the community together, Christ who fills and gives meaning to the rites and makes them fruitful. The Church, united with Christ, offers with Christ the eternal sacrifice to the Father.

When we all come together for the liturgy, we are much more than a crowd that gathers for a concert, sporting event, or lecture. We are not spectators, but a worshipping assembly, being formed, by Christ, into the very body of Christ. And our presence is no accident. As Pope Francis writes of the apostles at the Last Supper, “no one had earned a place at that Supper. All had been invited. Or better said: all had been drawn there by the burning desire that Jesus had to eat that Passover with them” (DD, 4). As we hear in Eucharistic Prayer III, “look graciously upon this family, whom you have summoned before you.”

So what is the liturgy? Liturgy is God gathering his people together to offer worship through, with, and in Christ. Liturgy follows patterns, many of which are extremely ancient. Liturgy speaks many languages—not only spoken language, but also the languages of movement, sound, silence, gesture, and symbol. 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 Christ gathers a community in prayer.

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, like the presider, altar servers, readers, Eucharistic ministers, and choristers, need to get into the sacred space somehow!) but, more importantly, the procession is a symbol of the gathering of the people of God around the cross of Christ. Procession is a powerful

symbol of the Church on a journey to the Kingdom. Music accompanies the procession—and not just music, but the whole assembly joining in a song of praise. In the liturgy, communal singing really matters: the simple act of singing together both expresses and reinforces the reality that we are one in Christ.

After the entrance procession, 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 we can feel bad about ourselves, but so we can recognize our need for God. Because how can we recognize God’s power if we fail to recognize our own weakness? The pattern we see at the beginning of our liturgy—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 same pattern is reflected in the Gloria, the song of praise which is sung on Sundays (except the Sundays of Advent and Lent) as well as on 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 exhausts 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 petition, an “ask”—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

The first document to emerge from the Second Vatican Council was *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Most of us know that the Council allowed for the liturgy to be in the vernacular, and opened the way for laypeople to participate more actively in the Mass, by joining in the dialogues and responses, singing many of the parts of



the Mass, and taking on different liturgical ministries. What is less well known is *why* those changes were made: so that all could participate fully, consciously, and actively, and become “deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy.”

What is “the spirit of the liturgy”? As we look at the Introductory Rites of the Mass, we can see that the spirit of the liturgy is response to the invitation of God. The spirit of the liturgy is entering into community and walking together with Christ. The spirit of the liturgy is humility and joy, wonder and awe in the presence of God.

As our exploration of the Mass unfolds over the coming weeks, we’ll add new layers as we seek to answer this question—what does it mean to be imbued with the spirit of the liturgy?

—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 have prepared a place for me at the table;
you *want* me to be here today.
Help me to enter into the Mass
with heart and mind, body 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.