

The Liturgy of the Mass: A Celebration through History

What is the Mass?

It is common to hear the Mass referred to as the liturgy. The original names for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Mass include:

- The Breaking of the Bread
- The Lord's Supper
- The Eucharist
- The Offering
- The Holy Sacrifice
- The Holy

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says: “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.” (CCC 1324)

“The Eucharist is the heart and the summit of the Church's life, for in it Christ associates his Church and all her members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered once for all on the cross to his Father; by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church.” (CCC 1407)

The Church is the Body of Christ and **through the celebration of the Eucharist the Church becomes most fully what she is**. We are present at the one sacrifice that Christ offered the Father, and we join our own sacrifices to His at every Mass. **The Mass is also a banquet**. Offering our sacrifices to those of the Lord, we in return receive His Body and Blood and become more fully part of His Body here on earth.

The Mass as Ritual

The celebration of the Liturgy of the Mass is as a ritual – which in the western Catholic Church is universal in its form. In other words, if you are familiar with the Mass in your own language, if you go to the slums of Kenya, while the language will be different, you will be able to follow the liturgy because all the parts are the same – even if the language is different or the people sing and dance differently – because the basic form of the liturgy is the same in any particular age.

But over the history of all ages, what is truer is that the Mass consists of changeable and unchangeable elements. More on that later

The Liturgy of the Mass Today

A note on nomenclature: “Rite” refers to self-governing church in union with the Pope. “rite” refers to the way in which a self-governing church celebrates the Mass. Confusing, right?

Remember that what we think of as the Roman Catholic Church (1.1 billion members worldwide) is more correctly called the “Latin Rite of the Catholic Church.” Within that Rite (capital

R) there are several “rites” or ways to celebrate the Mass. Here in the United States we celebrate the Latin rite in English (although some places also celebrate the older Tridentine rite in Latin, i.e., the “Latin Mass.”) But even in the Latin Rite there are other authorized ways (rites) to celebrate the Mass. For example

- Ambrosian Liturgy of Milan – celebrated since the time of St. Ambrose in the 4th century.
- Mozarabic liturgy - used by Christian of Arab descent in limited parts of Spain. This is part of the history of the Church which fell under Moorish rule after 711 AD until the Moors were driven from Spain in 1492.

An Outline of the Mass Celebrated in the Latin Rite

Introductory Rites

Entrance

Procession / Hymn / Sign of the Cross / Greeting

Penitential Rite

Preparation / Silence / Confiteor –or- option / Invocation

Kyrie - The Kyrie dates to 4th century Jerusalem. It was revised in the 5th century by Pope Gelasius. Pope Gregory reduced the text to only “*Kyrie eleison*” and “*Christe eleison.*”

Gloria - The Gloria dates back to a 2nd century Greek text. The text we commonly use now dates back to a Frankish source in the 9th century. The *Gloria* is omitted during Advent and Lent.

Opening Prayer

“Let us pray... / silence / the Collect / Amen

Liturgy of the Word – the pattern of readings at Sunday liturgies has had many variations in the millennia. In the earliest age of the church it was up to the presider. Now, the Church follows a common Lectionary which lays out the readings over a three-year cycle, covering all the major portions of Holy Scripture.

First Reading (Old Testament)

Responsorial Psalm

Second Reading (New Testament)

Gospel

Homily

Dismissal of the Catechumens and Candidates

Creed - The Creed was last major element added to the Mass (11th century). It exists in three forms: Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian.. The version that is commonly used today is the Nicene Creed (or Apostles for children’s masses).

Prayers of the Faithful

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Presentation of the Gifts / Preparation of the Altar - collection / procession of gifts / Offering the gifts / washing the hands

*Prayer over the gifts**Eucharistic Prayer*

Preface

Sanctus (the Sanctus text is the oldest of the Mass, even though it wasn't added until somewhere between the 1st and 5th centuries. Its purpose is to conclude the Preface of the Mass. The Sanctus also appears in the 6th century hymn, Te Deum.)

Epiclesis

Institution narrative and consecration
Memorial (*Anamnesis*)

Eucharistic Prayer "proper" to the priest alone.

Memorial Acclamation (Mystery of Faith)

Intercessions

Eucharistic Prayer "proper"

Doxology and Great Amen

Communion Rite*Lord's Prayer**Sign of Peace**Breaking of the Bread*

Lamb of God (The *Agnus Dei* was introduced in the Mass by Pope Sergius - 8th century)

*Communion**Prayer After Communion***Concluding Rite***Final Blessing***The Origin and History of the Mass**

As noted earlier, the Mass has changeable and unchangeable parts. But there always has to be a beginning!

Origin

Early Christian worship had an origin: Jewish worship form and practice. The early disciples did not create new worship practices any more than did Jesus Christ. They all prayed as Jews and worshipped as Jews. The earliest Christians were Jews who recognized and accepted Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, and the worship that they practiced was liturgical because Jewish worship was liturgical. For this reason we see in the New Testament that the early Christians continued their Jewish worship practices, even while they added some uniquely Christian components. The most central new content was the sacrament of the Eucharist (or Communion) as instituted by Christ at the Last Supper. However, in the early Church this was celebrated as a separate service for many years.

This living continuity of worship from Temple to Synagogue and into the early Christian Church is why there is a highly developed Christian liturgical order in use by the end of the first century, within sixty years of Christ's resurrection. The basis of that early Christian worship is:

- The **worship of God in the Temple** in Jerusalem (with set forms and frequency of prayer and sacrifice – from *Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*). **The primary activity was sacrifice.**
- A **developed cycle of prayers, blessings and meals**: daily, weekly, monthly and annually.
 - These meals included the “breaking of bread” and the “blessing of the cup”, and contained parallels with both the temple sacrifice and the messianic feast - and in principle they were required for every meal.
 - However, it took on the greatest importance in family meals and especially the meals of the Holy Days.
- **Passover** is perhaps the ultimate example of how Jesus Christ transformed a Jewish worship practice into something new and different.
 - *berakoth* (a special form of Jewish prayer, a thanksgiving)
 - In principle it was required for every Jewish meal, and included the expectation of the messianic banquet by the remnant of Israel, and so became a unique sacrifice of its own.
 - The meal was preceded by an obligatory hand-washing, followed by the drinking of a first cup of wine by each person who repeated the following blessing:
 - "Blessed be thou, Yahweh, our God, King of the universe, who givest us this fruit of the vine."
 - The meal then began, with the father of the family or presiding member of the community breaking the bread which was to be given to all present, with the following blessing:
 - "Blessed be thou, Yahweh, our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth."
- A later focus of worship was that of the **synagogue**. A form patterned on temple worship, but without the sacrificial element which took place only in the Temple, and with a strong element of **teaching and remembering**.
 - Litany
 - Confession of God’s faithfulness and humanity’s sinfulness
 - Intercessory prayers
 - Scripture readings
 - Preaching
 - Benediction (blessing) at the end of the service

Acts 2:46 says that "day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart". On a daily basis the Apostles continued their Jewish worship practices in the temple, and on a daily basis broke the bread of communion. This regularity of time is further confirmed in Acts 3:1 where Peter and John were going to the temple because it was the hour of prayer. Not only did they

continue in Jewish worship practice, but they kept the liturgical cycle of daily prayers at set hours of the day as well as the major feast days.

Christian worship, then, was a Christ-centered pattern that

- the meaning and some features of temple worship;
- the cycle of prayers, blessings and meals - including the Old and New Testament practices of liturgy, baptism, and Paschal feast that became the Eucharist, and certain of the feast days; and
- continued and preserved the traditional structure of synagogue worship.

Worship in the Early Church

Documents from the earliest ages of the church reveal that Eucharistic liturgy was already a tradition with the Christian community. Three noteworthy documents were

- The *Didache* (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles - written between 50-110 AD)
- Writings of Justin Martyr (150 AD)
 - Mass after a Baptism (First Apology, 65-66)
 - Sunday Mass in Rome (First Apology, 67)
 - The Perfect and Acceptable Sacrifice (Dialogue, 117)
- Writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons (185 AD)
 - On Sacrifice (Against Heresies, 4.17.5-4.18.6)
 - The Eucharistic Prayer (Apostolic Tradition)
 - At Easter Mass (Apostolic Tradition)

The *Didache* is a "short treatise" or summary of Christian teaching, not a complete treatise or document of the liturgy. As such, it mentions a form of the Eucharistic Prayer, borrowing from many Jewish themes, that liturgies included, provides some details about text/language used, but is important a document because it shows that early on there was an emphasis on

- the Eucharistic ("thanksgiving") nature of the ceremony,
- the necessity for a gathering of the people gathered, and
- the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

The writings of Justin Martyr and St Irenaeus repeat these same aspects but strongly emphasize a **Catholic understanding of Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ.**

Other points of interest

- During time of Roman persecution, congregations were small, brevity and simplicity were important.
- Masses were celebrated at the homes of known Christians. They were also frequently celebrated within the Catacombs where the dead in Christ could be remembered. Because the dead in Christ were believed to have entered Heaven, they were still considered part of the Church, the Body of Christ, united as One by Christ who

conquered death. There in Heaven they participate in the heavenly liturgy. The Mass is where the Christians on Earth unite with those in Heaven in this heavenly liturgy around the one Sacrifice, transcending time and space, to celebrate the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

- Within the catacombs, it was not uncommon to celebrate the Mass using a tomb or sarcophagus as an altar. A tradition developed where Christians, to this day, usually celebrate Mass atop an altar that contains a relic or bone fragment of early Christian saint.

The Mass of the latter Early Church (4th century and later)

After toleration of Christianity, congregations increased in size. Development of liturgical rites became more elaborate, vessels and vestments enriched. By this time there was a clear demarcation of languages: Latin in the west, Greek in the center, and Syriac (and other Semitic languages in the east)

By the end of the 4th century, there existed 4 distinct liturgical types (or rites): Antiochene, Alexandrian, Roman, and Gallican. Each primary rite included many variations that varied according to region:

- Antiochene (Greek) Rite
- Byzantine Rite
 - Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom
 - Liturgy of St. James
- Armenian Rite
- Maronite Rite
- East Syrian/Chaldean Rite
 - Chaldean Mass: The Liturgy of Mar Addai and Mar Mari
- The Syro-Malabar Church, India
- The Syro-Malankara Church, India
- Coptic (Egyptian)
- Roman (Latin) Rite
- Gallican Rite
 - Used in northwestern Europe.
 - Mostly supplanted by Roman liturgy by 800AD.
- Ambrosian Liturgy of Milan
- Mozarabic liturgy

Reform of Roman Liturgy by Pope St. Gregory the Great (590 - 1570AD)

Pope St. Gregory the Great was the first to officially codify a version of the Roman Liturgy, later referred to as the "Rite of St. Gregory." His version would become the standard used by subsequent versions of the Roman Liturgy. He was responsible for the following:

- Simplification, orderly arrangement, reduction of variable prayers
- definitive arrangement of the Eucharistic prayers

- The Roman Lectionary, which was a collection of readings from Scripture to be read during the liturgy, is given definitive form. It was still subject to later revisions.
- Standardized Gregorian Chants for use during worship.

Later modifications to the Gregorian reforms

- The *Gloria* was introduced, probably of Gallican influence. Incorporated into the Roman liturgy in about the 11th century.
- The offertory prayers and Lavabo (hand washing) introduced prior to the 14th century.
- Blessings and other prayers forms were introduced gradually in middle ages that adapted certain prayers with the Liturgy of the Mass for feast days

But ...

In the almost 1000 years between the time of Pope Gregory the Great and the Protestant Reformation, simply put, a great range of local variation again entered the practice of the Liturgy of the Mass.

The Tridentine Reform of the Roman Liturgy (1570 - 1962AD)

Simply put – glossing over details of deeper liturgical matters – the Tridentine Reforms were driven by the following elements:

- The Council Fathers sought to **restore uniformity** to the Roman Liturgy by eliminating regional variations that had evolved from Pope Gregory's original liturgy, some of which had become quite exuberant, causing great confusion.
- Response to **Protestant Reformation**
 - Liturgy as **clarification of Doctrine**
 - Protestant Reformers had modified the Missal and removed doctrinal themes they rejected and substituted for it communion services that expressed their ideals but broke free from historic liturgical evolution.

The Council Fathers wanted a traditional, uniform liturgy that expressed clearly and concisely the traditional doctrinal elements of the Mass, all the things which the Reformers were rejecting, to help clarify doctrine.

The Vatican II Reforms (1962 - 2002AD)

Because more emphasis had been placed on the sacred vessels that contained the Eucharist than on the community gathered to partake of the Eucharist, much of the meaning behind participating in the Body and Blood of Christ had been lost over time. The Second Vatican Council sought to bring the focus of the mass back to include the importance of the gathered assembly, the community, the mystical Body of Christ, as it had throughout the early church - as a fuller expression of the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. This was done not only with the wisdom of the 2000 years of liturgical tradition but also with insights expressed by the Early Church on the importance of community in worship.

- It encouraged the faithful to receive the Eucharist more frequently.
- It allowed for more congregational participation in spoken responses and music
- It allowed flexibility and adaptations to the pastoral needs of each diocese.

- Simplification of Liturgical Rites to make them more easily understood by the faithful
- The Council called for the retention of the Latin language. Over time, Bishops requested missal translations that made use of the vernacular language, seeing its pastoral benefits in Orthodox and Protestant churches.
- Soon, reception of Eucharist standing, in the hand optional, as had been done in the time of St. Cyril.
- Eventually Chalice of Blood was offered, once again, to the congregation.
- Missal of Pope Paul VI (*Novus Ordo Missae*)
 - re-introduction of the intercessory prayers (not since Gregory), allowing individual communities to write prayers for local needs
 - Reworking of Eucharistic Prayer
 - Elevated the proclamation of Scripture to a place of higher dignity within the Mass, giving the liturgy two distinct parts: The Liturgy of the Word, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
 - Latin/English text of the Mass (1975 edition)
 - Roman Lectionary of Pope Paul VI: 1970 edition 3-year cycle collection of Scripture Readings for all Sundays, Feasts, and Weekdays
 - Revised Roman Lectionary of Pope Paul VI: Revised 1998 edition 3-year cycle collection of Scripture Readings for all Sundays, Feasts, and Weekdays to expose the faithful to a wider assortment of biblical readings.