

## THE MASS (Part 5)

### THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST (Part C)

#### COMMUNION RITE

**This consists of:** Lord's Prayer, rite of peace, breaking of bread, commingling, "Lamb of God", private preparation of priest and people, invitation to Communion, distribution of Communion, Communion hymn, purification of the sacred vessels, silent prayer/hymn of praise and the prayer after Communion.

**LORD'S PRAYER:** The Lord's Prayer (also known as the 'Our Father') first entered the Mass in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. With its themes of bread (spiritual nourishment), forgiveness and mutual peace, this prayer was an ideal preparation for Communion and it usually occurred after the 'breaking of the bread'. Pope St Gregory the Great (590-604), influenced by St Augustine, considered the Lord's Prayer to be **closely linked to the Eucharistic Prayer**, and for this reason he transferred it, placing it before the 'breaking of the bread'. This prayer has also been customarily followed by a further prayer (called the embolism) asking the Lord to grant perfect peace (*'Deliver us Lord from every evil and grant us peace in our day....'*). The Lord's Prayer in the context of the Mass concludes with *'For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever'*. This is seen as a more positive ending rather than *'...deliver us from evil'*, even though it is not part of the original prayer given us by the Lord. The Lord's Prayer begins the community's preparation for sharing the Eucharist.

**RITE OF PEACE:** Among early Christians the kiss of peace was seen as a **seal placed on prayer**. This gesture soon came into the liturgy and it first appeared after the general intercessions which concluded the Liturgy of the Word. Some time between 401 and 417 the kiss of peace was moved to a position following the Lord's Prayer. This new place also agreed with the Lord's Prayer in that we also ask for forgiveness during the Lord's Prayer. Eventually the **sign of peace** became **closely linked** with the **reception** of the **Eucharist**. The sign of peace expresses the fact that Christ is the source of all peace and therefore the gesture of giving a sign of peace expresses our faith that Christ is present in the assembly.

In fact, we could ask ourselves if we can legitimately approach the altar for Holy Communion if we have not first shared the sign of peace with our brothers and sisters. This is something we could all think about - along with the question of how much we mean it when we offer it. This is one of the earliest additions to the Mass as can be seen above. For some time after the **Council of Trent** in the **16<sup>th</sup> century** (the 'Tridentine Mass'), the sign of peace was mainly

**restricted** to the priest and the deacon, but the vestige was there right through - leading to its' **full restoration in the 1960's**.

The Sign of Peace is largely **symbolic** and is experienced well when offered to those next to us and perhaps in front or behind. It should be **brief** and is not served well by people **wandering from their seat**, as this disrupts the orderly flow of the Mass. The priest is prohibited from moving from the sanctuary to offer the sign. He offers it to those on the sanctuary.

**'BREAKING OF THE BREAD'**: Following the rite of the Passover meal, Christ took bread into his hands, said a prayer of praise, and then broke the bread. At one time the breaking of the bread was the only thing that happened between the Eucharistic Prayer and Communion. The breaking of the bread is seen as a sign of unity: by participating in the one bread which is broken, all form the one body in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17). As the numbers of early Christians increased, this breaking of the bread became quite elaborate, but with the adoption of unleavened bread in the West, and with the introduction of small hosts for the people, the importance of the rite diminished greatly. The Mass now strives to highlight the **symbolic meaning** of the rite mentioned above. A larger host is often used and broken during this rite. Pieces of this host are distributed to some of the faithful at Communion as a sign of this **unity** that exists in the congregation.

Terminology: before the bread is consecrated to become Christ's Body and Blood, we call it '**altar bread**' and after the consecration we call it the '**host**'. (*Latin 'hostia' – a victim slain in sacrifice*)

**COMMINGLING**: (Mixing of the bread and wine) A small piece of the celebrant's host is placed in the Precious Blood. The Mass has known various commingling rites over 2000 years. Each is considered to express some aspect of **unity**. It is thought as well that as commingling appears in all the Eastern liturgies (Catholic and Orthodox) it may have been retained in recent times for ecumenical reasons.

**'LAMB OF GOD' (AGNUS DEI)**: The breaking of the bread was especially lengthy in the papal liturgy of earlier times. So it was accompanied by the singing of a **chant**. The chant was sung by the people and the assisting clergy, and was **repeated** as often as needed. With the change in the type of bread, the breaking of the bread became quite brief. As a result the text came to be sung only three times. The wording remained the same. However, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward, the last phrase changed to '*grant us peace*'. This was probably to link the chant to the sign of peace that comes before the chant.

**PRIVATE PREPARATION OF PRIEST AND PEOPLE**: In the Middle Ages in France, various prayers appeared that were said by the

priest. These prayers are said **silently**. They are addressed to Christ and they are meant as private prayers to **foster** the **devotion** of the priest. At this time - after the "Lamb of God" - **every** member of the assembly has an opportunity for individual and silent prayer before Communion.

**INVITATION TO COMMUNION:** Various prayers introducing the Communion of the priest and the people entered the Mass in the Middle Ages. At that time the priest gave the invitation: *'Behold the Lamb of God...'* and repeated three times: *'Lord, I am not worthy...'*. Today there is one invitation which precedes the Communion of both priest and people. The priest shows the consecrated Host to the people and says aloud: *'This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'* (John 1:29); to which is added: *'Happy are **those** who are called to his supper'* (Revelation 19:9). Both priest and people respond: *'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed'* (Matthew 8:9).

Sometimes you might hear the priest say: *'happy are **we** who are called to his supper'*. This is quite wrong because it gives the impression that only **those present** are saved or prayed for. As mentioned in an earlier part of this series, **everyone in the universal Church** is prayed for at each Mass.

**DISTRIBUTION OF HOLY COMMUNION:** Although in the early days of the Church, both priest and people simply consumed the body and blood in silence, the need to verbalise the meaning of this action soon resulted in various prayers accompanying the distribution of the Eucharist. Hence, today as a traditional sign of service to one another, the priest or extraordinary minister says: **'The Body of Christ'** and, where appropriate, **'The Blood of Christ'**, and presents the Body and Blood of Christ to the communicant.

In some places - usually because of poor catechesis (teaching) - the people can be led to believe that when they receive the Host and not the chalice, they receive the Body and not the Blood of Christ. This is a serious error. In each species of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ is present by **transubstantiation** (i.e. the **total change of their essence from bread and wine to Christ's Body and Blood**). This includes the  tiniest particle or droplet  of either species. This is at the very centre of our belief as Catholics.

Of special significance is the **invitation** to receive the Lord, since it highlights the importance of the assembled people as the 'Body of Christ'. The phrase expresses the presence of Christ in the sacrament, the communicant and the assembly. Each person actively responds by saying **'Amen'** and through this response the person professes belief in the 'Real Presence' of Christ. It is vital that the communicant responds with the word **'Amen'**, which is a **prayer**. It is most **inappropriate** to say something like **'thank you'**, as this

**devalues** the opportunity to make the **prayer of acceptance** as we receive Communion, that we **affirm** what has been said to us.

**COMMUNION HYMN:** From the time of St. Augustine (354-430) it was customary to sing a psalm during the distribution of Holy Communion. Since the Communion of priest and people forms a single rite, the **hymn** mostly begins when the priest receives the sacrament and **continues** as long as is convenient. When there is no singing, the antiphon found in the sacramentary may be recited by the people, by a reader or by the priest - but it is not required. This is done before Communion is distributed.

It is **required that the priest(s) receive Communion before others** so that the '**sacrifice**' may be **fulfilled**. This is central to his role as 'priest'. Sometimes in some places, you may have seen the priest and extraordinary ministers receiving Communion last in a supposed role of 'service'. This is a serious aberration and betrays a lack of **understanding of sacrifice** in the Church.

**PURIFICATION OF THE SACRED VESSELS:** From the late 4<sup>th</sup> century the oldest form of purification was the ablution of the mouth. This was done so that nothing of the sacred Body and Blood remained in the mouth after receiving Communion. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the washing of the chalice was introduced, and the cleansing of the priest's fingers. Today, the Mass has simplified this action. The priest **cleanses** the **sacred vessels** - chalice and paten/ciborium - as he stands at the **altar**.

**Some recent changes:** For some years following Vatican II, an acolyte or extraordinary minister was permitted to cleanse the sacred vessels. A few years ago, extraordinary ministers were prohibited from cleansing the sacred vessels because many **abuses** had occurred in various parts of the world - mainly involving a lack of **respect** for the sacred species and the sacred vessels.

Also following Vatican II, for many years, the purification of the vessels was mostly done at the **credence table** (on the side), but this was also changed because of many **abuses**, and must now be done on the **altar**.

**SILENT PRAYER/HYMN OF PRAISE:** Private prayer after Communion has long been a recommended practice. St Alphonsus Liguori urged at least a half hour of prayer after the reception of the Eucharist!! The Mass now provides times for **silent prayer** immediately after the distribution of Holy Communion. As an **alternative** to silent prayer, a **hymn** of praise may be sung. There has been an unfortunate trend in our time towards a **loss by many of a sense of what to do in these silent periods**. They are times of vital silent and personal prayer. It has been a long tradition that people stay for awhile after Mass in a quiet church for silent prayer with the Lord whose Body and Blood they have just received.

**PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION:** The desire to express verbally the effects of the Eucharist gave rise to a Prayer after Communion said by the priest. First appearing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and arranged in the same way as the Opening Prayer, it was called the prayer at the conclusion, since it ended the Mass. It was also known as the Prayer after Communion. Today, this prayer is preceded by a period of **silence**, either immediately after the Communion and/or after the invitation: *'Let us pray'*.

*<Here ends the Liturgy of the Eucharist>*

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### CONCLUDING RITE OF THE MASS

**This consists of** announcements, greeting and blessing, dismissal, veneration of the altar and recessional.

**INTRODUCTION:** Although the early celebration of the Eucharist seems to have ended immediately with the distribution of Communion, Christians soon felt a psychological need to round off the liturgy with a concluding rite. Most often this was done by a simple dismissal which was often preceded by a blessing of the people. Through the centuries, the concluding rite became more elaborate. The Church in our time has greatly simplified and given better structure to the concluding rite. The primary elements of the rite are the **priest's blessing** and the **dismissal**. The rite requests the people to go forth from the church and serve one another and all who live in the world.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:** At various times and places, the giving of announcements has occurred at various places within the Mass. They have occurred after Communion and at the end of the homily. Today, announcements are usually made before or after the Prayer after Communion. Because the **ambo** is reserved for the proclamation of the Word of God, the announcements are preferably given from some other location in the church - mostly from the **priest's chair**. If someone else is giving a brief talk, it should be given from a different microphone or location from the ambo itself. Such talks should be **very brief** and should not prolong the Mass, as they can easily **distract** from the Mass itself.

**FINAL BLESSING:** In the final blessing the priest prays that the greatest of all benefits may be given to those who have listened to God's Word and shared in the Eucharist. This blessing, taking place over the people who depart from the church, is based on Luke 24:50 when Christ, before being taken up to heaven, had his hands upraised and blessed the apostles. The earliest form of concluding

blessing was at Rome and usually followed the Prayer after Communion. An additional and more simple form of blessing gradually began to appear. Today the **blessing precedes the dismissal**. There are **3 forms**:-

After the customary greeting (*'The Lord be with you....'*)

1. A simple blessing (*'In the name of the Father and of the Son....'*)
2. A solemn blessing - the people are asked to bow and the priest gives three invocations to which the people respond to each by saying: *'Amen'*. Then this is concluded with a simple blessing.
3. There are also various prayers that can be prayed over the people and they are followed by the simple blessing.

**DISMISSAL:** (*e.g. - 'The Mass is ended. Go in peace'*) The dismissal **sends** each member of the congregation to do **good works** - praising and blessing the Lord. A formal dismissal of the people is found in almost all traditional liturgies. Today the sacramentary gives three dismissal forms. The words *'Go in peace'*, found in all three, have a **scriptural** origin. (Mark 5:34). The word **'Mass'** itself, comes from this dismissal. In the Latin, ***'Ite missa est'*** means *'Go, you are sent forth'*. So **'Mass'** comes from *'missa'* or **'sent'**, showing the real importance of going forth from the Eucharistic Sacrifice to change the world.

**VENERATION OF THE ALTAR:** The kissing of the altar at the conclusion of the liturgy is a tradition found in many rites. (rite = form of liturgy - e.g. Maronite, Melkite, Coptic, Greek, Roman, etc. - all Catholic) This kiss of farewell mirrors the kiss whereby the altar is greeted at the beginning of Mass. Both are gestures that venerate the altar as the symbol of Christ. The farewell kiss looks back to the Eucharist which has just concluded and anticipates the next occasions when the community will assemble around the Ambo and Altar.

**RECESSIONAL:** Medieval Mass books often contained various texts to accompany the recession (leaving) of the priest. But the tradition has been that music is not required to accompany the priest as he leaves. However, in **modern times in most parishes**, the congregation sings a **recessional hymn**. It is a means of prolonging the festive character of the celebration. It serves to conclude the celebration on a joyful tone. It is traditional in recent centuries that the people **remain in their seats** until the priest and ministers return to the front door of the church or the sacristy.

**FINAL NOTE:** The Church, in her wisdom, has set down the formula of words to be used in the Mass and other liturgies. Sometimes today one hears people changing words in spoken parts of the Mass and even seeming to shout these different words aloud. E.g.

changing the pronoun 'He', referring to God, with 'God'. It is quite out of place for this to occur, as it destroys, rather than builds up **unity** which is at the **core** of the Eucharistic celebration. Changing words in private prayer is one thing, but in community prayer it breaks down unity.

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**PERSONAL NOTE:** I hope you have found these five reflections helpful in your understanding of the Mass. I am always happy to hear feedback and ideas for possible future endeavours.  
Father Michael Nilon