

“DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”

A Class on the Mass Part 1: The Beginnings

Each weekend we gather as a Catholic community to celebrate the Mass in which we not only recall the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord but experience it again as a Real Presence. Our celebration of this mystery has developed and grown over the centuries from that moment when Jesus instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper to the present time. This series is intended to give us a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Mass to help us celebrate in a more fuller and devotional way. In our celebration we follow a prescribed “ritual” designed by the Church to express our faith. This ritual is made up of prayers, readings, and actions which help us to pray communally. Here in the United States the official ritual that we follow has been provided by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and approved by Rome. In 2003 the bishops promulgated the “General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Including the Adaptations for the Dioceses of the United States” (commonly called the “GIRM”, pronounced “Germ”) as the official ritual to be followed in our parishes. We will be using the principles in this document as our source for this series. Next year we will experience changes in the words that we use in the Mass. The actions will stay the same but the translation of the prayers we use will be truer to that of the Latin text that is the official document used throughout the world. In this series we will point out some of these changes.

In the GIRM we read:

“The celebration of Mass, as the action of Christ and the people of God.... is the center of the of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit. In it, moreover, during the course of the year, the mysteries of redemption are recalled so as in some way to be made present. Furthermore, the other sacred actions and all the activities of the Christian life are bound up with it, flow from it, and ordered to it. It is therefore of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass—that is, the Lord’s Supper—be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful taking part in it, according to the proper state of each, may derive from it more abundantly those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood and entrusted to the Church, his beloved Bride, as the memorial of His Passion and Resurrection. This will best be accomplished if with due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and mind, a participation burning with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and demanded by the very nature of the celebration, and to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism.” (GIRM I, 17-18)

It is hoped that this presentation on the Mass will lead all of us to a more “conscious, active, and fuller participation” through a deeper understanding of our ritual.

We begin with the term “Mass” itself which is derived from the old Latin dismissal used by the priest, “Ite, missa est”, “Go, It is ended.” which was used at the end of the celebration of the Eucharist, to dismiss the people. It took on a deeper meaning of “mission” that the people were sent forth to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world. “Missa” gradually became “Mass”. Although we commonly use the term “Mass” to describe our weekly celebration, the proper term for the Mass is “Eucharist” a Greek word meaning Thanksgiving. It is in the Mass that we give

God our gratitude through praise and worship for our salvation through Jesus Christ.

Our ritual traces its origin back to the actions of Jesus Christ at the last Supper. When He gathered with his apostles in that upper room just before His Passion and Death, Jesus was celebrating the Jewish feast of Passover. He followed the Jewish ritual but deviated from it by breaking bread and telling his disciple: “Take this all of you and eat it for this is My Body”, and then a cup of wine, instructing them, “Take this and drink from it for this is My Blood.” He concluded with “Do this in memory of Me.” Obviously, at the time His disciples did not understand what this meant until after the Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Just as the Jews wanted to celebrate and ritualize their Passover from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, the disciples of Jesus wanted to celebrate what he did on the cross, their “Passover” from the slavery of sin into the freedom of being Children of God. What better way to do this than to recall and use what Jesus did at the Last Supper before He died.

In the beginning, the followers of Jesus, at the time members of the Jewish faith, attended the synagogue service on the Sabbath (Saturday) in the morning where they heard the Scriptures and then in the evening gathered in private homes called “Church Houses” to celebrate what they called the “Lord’s Supper”. After leaving the Jewish faith, Christians gradually united these two services into one Eucharistic Liturgy now celebrated on Sunday (the traditional day of the Resurrection). We had the birth of our Mass made up of the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist. Over the centuries the Mass has undergone many changes, additions, and adaptations in form and language to meet the spiritual needs of the Faithful but in essence the Mass never changes as the Eucharistic Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

We will in future presentations explain the theology and ritual of the Mass to better understand what and how we celebrate this central Mystery of our Faith. Our next presentation will examine the real Presence of Jesus in our celebration.

Reflection Questions: *(Something to think about)*

1. Why do you go to Mass each weekend? Habit, Duty, Fear, or Worship?
2. What is your personal experience of Mass? Do you enjoy being there?
3. What impact does the Mass have on your daily life after you have left the Church?