

## **A Walk Through the Mass: A Step-by-Step Explanation**

### **Week One: Introductory Rites and Concluding Rites**

Over the next three weeks across the diocese, we will be conducting a “Walk through the Mass: A Step-by-Step Explanation”.

The Mass is the ritual Catholics celebrate in response to Jesus’ command to “do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19). One of the basic, distinctive marks of ritual prayer is that Catholics know what is going to happen next. We do things over and over. When the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” without any thought or hesitation the congregation responds, “And with your Spirit.” The priest says, “Let us pray,” and the congregation stands up.

Our daily lives have their rituals also: There are set ways of greeting people, eating, responding to a text. And when we are accustomed to a certain way of doing things, we seldom ask why we do it that way. In the Eucharist, too, we have many ritual actions which we perform without asking why.

### **What is the Mass?**

A good way to describe the Mass is to say that it is Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday made sacramentally present today in ritual. It is not merely a meal which *reminds* us of the Last Supper, or a Passion play which helps recall Good Friday, or a sunrise service which celebrates the Lord’s Resurrection. The Mass is, therefore, our opportunity as Catholic Christians to praise and thank God for the gift of our salvation in Christ Jesus. In short, the Mass is one way in which we share in the Pascal Mystery (the Passion, Death and Resurrection) of Christ.

*The basic shape of the ritual of the Mass can be described as a meal.* This is not to say it is “just another meal” or that we are ignoring the Mass as sacrifice. Not at all. The point is, the shape of the Mass, even when viewed as sacrifice, is that of a meal.

When friends gather for a meal, they sit and talk. Eventually they move to the table, say grace, pass the food and eat and drink, and finally take their leave and go home. On our walk through the Mass, we will follow this same map: we will see ritual acts of 1) gathering, 2) storytelling, 3) meal sharing, and 4) commissioning.

We will focus today on the gathering or Introductory Rites of the Mass and the commissioning or Concluding Rites of the Mass. Next week we will look at the storytelling, or what we call the Liturgy of the Word. And the following week we will focus on meal sharing, or the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

### **Gathering (The Introductory Rites)**

Coming together, assembling, and forming community is at the heart of our Sunday worship. The reason behind each of the ritual actions of the first part of the Mass can be found in this word: gathering. The purpose of these rites is to bring us together into one Body, ready to listen and break bread together. Note that God is the one who has summoned us to this celebration of the Eucharist. We are present in response to His invitation.

**Genuflection.** In medieval Europe, it was a custom to go down on one knee (to genuflect) before a king or person of rank. This secular mark of honor gradually entered the Church and people began to genuflect to the presence of Christ in the tabernacle before entering the pew. If the tabernacle is not located in the sanctuary, it is proper for members of the assembly to express their reverence for the altar with an even older custom and bow to it before entering the pew.

**Posture, song.** When the Mass begins everyone stands up. Standing is the traditional posture of the Christian at prayer that expresses our attentiveness to the Word of God and our readiness to carry it out. Often, we begin by singing together to unite our thoughts and our voices in a common word, rhythm and melody.

**Greeting.** We begin with the Sign of the Cross, reminding ourselves of our Baptism, and then the priest will greet us, saying, “The Lord be with you.” This prayer reminds us of Christ’s declaration that “...where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). The ritual response to this greeting is always the formula, “And with your Spirit”, which acknowledges that the priest has received the Spirit of God through his ordination to the priesthood.

**Penitential Rite.** All the other ritual acts of this first part of the Mass are intended to gather us together into a worshiping assembly. In the Penitential Rite, we are invited to call to mind our sins and the one (the Lord) sent to save us from the power of sin. While this Rite lacks the efficacy of sacramental absolution, we believe that through the reception of Holy Communion our less serious (venial) sins are forgiven.

**Glory to God.** Just as the angels proclaimed the praise of God at the birth of Christ, saying “Glory to God in the Highest” (Luke 2:13-14), we make our own declaration of praise and worship of the Holy Trinity in singing or reciting the hymn, “Glory to God.”

**Opening Prayer.** At the close of this first part of the Mass the priest will ask us to join our minds in prayer with the invitation, “Let us pray.” As the priest pauses, we offer our intentions. Then he will collect (or gather) them all into one prayer, to which we all respond “Amen,” a Hebrew word for “So be it.”

## **Commissioning (Concluding Rites)**

The burdens we have laid down at the door of the church for this Eucharist, we know we must now bear again—but now strengthened by this Eucharist and this community.

**Blessing and Dismissal.** We bow our heads to receive a blessing. As the priest names the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we make the Sign of the Cross. The priest or deacon then dismisses the assembly: “Go in peace.” And we give our liturgical “yes” by saying, “Thanks be to God.”

**Living the Eucharist in the world.** We leave the assembly and the church building carrying Christ within us. What happens in our lives during the week gives deeper meaning to the ritual actions we have celebrated at Mass, whether it is with family, work with the poor or just plain work. It is only in relation to our daily lives that the full meaning of the ritual actions of the Mass becomes clear to us. We bring Christ to the world.