

THE MASS - AN INTRODUCTION

This week I begin a series on the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I intend to work through all the parts of the Mass and briefly explain 'why' we do the various actions that make up the Mass. I hope that doing this will give us a better insight into the many and varied parts of the Mass that we celebrate each week. However, before I do this, here are some things that you might find interesting.

Other names for the Mass are Eucharist, Holy Communion and Lord's Supper and all these titles describe the central act of Catholic worship. This central act (Mass) is primarily an act of 'thanksgiving'. The word 'Eucharist' comes from the Greek 'eucharisteo' which means to give thanks. How did it come about? Well, in the New Testament there are four accounts of its institution. (1) by St Paul (1 Cor. 11:23-25) - "*For I received from the Lord what I also handed onto you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'*" In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"; and (2), in the gospels (Mt.26:26-28; Mk.14:22-24 and Lk.22:17-20). (3) It is recorded that it was celebrated by the early Christian community at Jerusalem (Acts 2:42,46) - "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*"; and (4) about St Paul on his visit to Troas (Acts. 20:7) - "*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, ...*".

These passages show that from a very early date the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a regular part of Christian worship, and was known to have been instituted by Christ. It was universally accepted from the beginning that the Eucharist conveyed to the believer the Body and Blood of Christ, and there was no intention of denying the reality of the Presence of Christ in the gifts. It was also widely held from the first that the Eucharist is a sacrifice. In Judaism bread and wine were sacrificial elements and the words 'covenant', 'memorial' and 'poured out' all have sacrificial associations. So from these beginnings we have what we celebrate each week, the Mass. Over the last 2000 years many changes have occurred. However, my aim is not to give a detailed history of the Mass. I will simply explain the various parts of the Mass as we celebrate them today and this may, at times, take into account a look into the past to discover how we come to celebrate these particular parts of the Mass today!!

There are four main parts to a Mass. These are:-

(1) INTRODUCTORY RITES: These are the entrance procession, entrance hymn, veneration of the altar, sign of the cross, greeting, introduction,

penitential rite, Sunday renewal of baptismal vows (optional), Lord have Mercy (Kyrie), Glory to God (Gloria) and the opening prayer.

(2) LITURGY OF THE WORD: This consists of the first reading, psalm response, second reading, gospel acclamation, gospel, homily, profession of faith and the general intercessions (prayer of the faithful).

(3) LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST: This is made up of:

A) The preparation of the gifts: preparation of the altar, presentation of the gifts, offertory hymn, prayers at the preparation of the gifts, mixing of water and wine, washing of the hands, prayer over the gifts and its invitation to prayer.

B) Eucharistic Prayer: Preface, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord", epiclesis, narrative of the institution, memorial acclamation, anamnesis, offering, intercessions, final doxology.

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

CONCLUDING RITE: The announcements, greeting and blessing, dismissal, veneration of the altar and recessional hymn or music.

And that's it!! In the coming weeks I will treat each of these areas individually starting with the Introductory Rites. It may be of interest to know that out of all the above the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist are the two most important elements of the Mass. The others help us to gain more from the most central elements of the celebration.

THE INTRODUCTORY RITES OF THE MASS

This Rite is made up of - the entrance procession, entrance hymn, veneration of the altar, sign of the cross, greeting, introduction, penitential rite, Sunday renewal of baptism (optional), Lord have Mercy (Kyrie), Glory to God (Gloria) and the opening prayer.

History: There was a gradual desire within the Church to give a definite starting point to the celebration of Mass and to provide an initial experience of prayer. This desire resulted in the gradual development of various introductory rites and formulas. For example, St Augustine in the 5th century, greeted the people before the Scriptures were proclaimed.

The Introductory Rites serve to begin, and to introduce and prepare those gathered. They also help to make the assembled people a unified community and to prepare them properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist.

On the importance scale to the whole Mass, these rites are of secondary importance and are celebrated as such. The major elements of the introductory rites are the entrance hymn and the opening prayer.

Entrance Procession: Historically, the sacristy used to be located close to the entrance of the churches in Rome and so the Pope or the officiating priest, and others in the liturgical procession would process from the door of the church to the altar. As sacristies began to be located closer to the sanctuary, the practice of the procession fell into complete disuse. Many parishes in more recent times have returned the sacristy to the area near the entrance of the church – just as we see at St Patrick’s, Wardell. Where that is difficult, it is usual for the priest and ministers to walk to the rear door and to enter from there – as we do at St Francis Xavier’s and Holy Family Churches. The procession has been restored because not only is the entrance procession **a solemn introduction of the priest and other ministers**, but it is also a **visual expression of all the people gathering to be a liturgical worshipping community**. The gradual entry into the church by members of the congregation is really the beginning of the entry procession.

Entrance Hymn: Traditionally, a hymn has always accompanied the entrance procession. The whole assembly has normally participated. **The purpose of the hymn is to open the celebration, deepen the unity of the people, introduce them to the mystery of the season (like Advent) or feast and accompany the procession.** If there is no singing at the entrance, the antiphon in the missal may be recited by the people, by some of them or by a reader - but is not required.

Historical point: Some of you may remember Sunday Masses of years ago, which did not include singing. One of the reasons behind this was the difficult period of occupation in Ireland, where, for many years the celebration of Mass was outlawed and was carried out in private, often on what were known to local communities as the local 'Mass rock' in the countryside or in private homes. Mass had to be quick and quiet or people and priests were imprisoned or worse.

Veneration of the Altar (the Kiss): Historically, in ancient times **the kiss** as a sign of greeting was used to show reverence for temples and images of false gods. In the **4th century, Christian worship appropriated** (i.e. took to itself) **this sign of honour**, since the altar was "*the table of the Lord*". Most altars over the centuries have traditionally been constructed of stone, since it clearly shows the symbolism that Christ was the cornerstone and spiritual rock of the Church. To further venerate the altar the priest may also incense it in more solemn Masses. In pre-Christian times incense had a number of meanings of - a symbol of sacrifice, a festive accompaniment for processions, a sign of honour, a means of purification and the expelling of evil spirits.

For Christians in the 11th century when the use of incense began, **it was used as a sign of purification and protection**. It was also a sign of the altar being enwrapped in an atmosphere of prayer and sacrifice ascending to God. (Incense always rises!) The veneration of the altar today, by kiss and/or by incense is an act of greeting that recalls that **what is shaped like a table is holy and sacred and is truly an altar of sacrifice**.

Sign of the Cross: Greeting and Introduction - Historically, **the sign of the cross** has been made from as early as the 2nd century. It has always been a **traditional beginning** to prayer and has strong **baptismal overtones**. The community that is at worship is **first and foremost a baptismal community**. One of the most ancient elements of the introductory rites has been **the greeting** extended by the presiding priest. It **expresses the presence (The Lord be with you!) of the Lord** to the assembled community. The Church is gathered together. **The introduction**, which should be brief, should **focus upon the special character** of the celebration or upon those who are present. It is appropriate that this introduction be made by the priest, whose role it is to gather the assembly in prayer. For a **temporary** period following the Second Vatican Council, **commentators** helped people to understand what was about to happen next in the Mass. This followed a period of great change in liturgical practice.

Penitential Rite - For centuries the Mass had no penitential rite. After much thought and reference to scripture (Matt 5:23-25) a simple penitential rite was placed at the beginning of Mass. **It has four parts** -

i) An invitation to the community to recall its sinfulness - "Let us call to mind our sins".

ii) A period of silent reflection.

iii) A common declaration that we are all sinners - "I confess" or "Lord have mercy" and other choices in the missal.

iv) A prayer prayed by the priest requesting forgiveness - "May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins.....". The penitential rite reminds us that we are always in need of reconciliation with God and with others. **This is NOT a sacramental experience of the Sacrament of Penance.**

Kyrie or "Lord have Mercy" - When the Kyrie or "Lord have Mercy" does not form part of the Penitential Rite above (if the " I confess" was used) **it serves as a set of acclamations** after it. These acclamations **praise the risen Christ for the goodness** that has been given to us and to all humanity.

Glory to God (Gloria): This is a hymn that has been modelled on the psalms and canticles of the bible. **Historically**, it was first used as an Easter hymn at dawn. It then found its way into Morning Prayer and was then incorporated into the Mass. By the 11th century, the Gloria was sung at all Masses on Sundays and on festive occasions. So the Gloria then, is a joyful hymn whose content is primarily that of praising God. Where possible, it should be sung on Sundays and on special feasts. It is not used during Lent or Advent.

Opening Prayer (or Collect): The presence of this prayer dates back at least to the 5th century. After the entrance procession, the priest greeted the people and then called them to prayer. The people would be silent and then the priest summed up and concluded the prayer on behalf of all present. In Gaul (modern day France) the prayer was known as the "Collecta", a prayer which "gathers together" the intentions of the faithful – hence, the term 'collect'. This prayer, like all prayers in the Mass, has the same structure: - An invitation, an address, a petition and a conclusion. The invitation (Let us pray) is calling the faithful to enter a period of silence and prayer. The prayer, like all prayers in the Mass is addressed to God the Father. The petition, the core of the prayer, is very general since it is being used to sum up all the unspoken prayers of the people, and the conclusion underlines the mediation of Christ. (We ask this through Christ our Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit).

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This brings to a conclusion the explanation of the first part of the Mass - the Introductory Rites. Next week I will begin to deal with the second part of the Mass - the Liturgy of the Word.

To get you ready for next week - Does your family enjoy looking back over treasured photo albums and retelling the stories behind the pictures? While every historical detail of your ancestry may not be recorded, photos capture the highlights and carry a 'sense' of your family's history, identity and values. When there is a fire, flood or other emergency, it is the photo albums that most families try to preserve.

The Scriptures are a bit like that. They are our faith family's 'photo album', the inspired recordings of our Christian and Jewish ancestors, retelling the stories of God's revelation in their midst. As you listen to the readings each Sunday (or weekday) at the Liturgy of the Word, allow God to speak to you through the stories of your faith heritage.