*"Nothing is greater or holier than the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass."* -Pope Pius IX, *Amantissimi Redemptoris* (1858)

*"And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."* -Rev. 4:8

## 1. The Most Perfect Worship

The Mass is the most perfect act of worship that man individually or the Church collectively can offer to God the Father. The Mass is the liturgical setting for the offering of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the "source and summit" of the Christian life (CCC 1324), and thus has a unique place in the Catholic Church. Nothing can take its place, nothing is comparable to it, and spiritual progress is impossible without it. This is due to the fact that in the Mass the very Person of Christ Himself is offered to the Father in the unbloody Sacrifice of the Altar.

All theology surrounding the Mass, all liturgical practice regarding how it is to be carried out and all disciplines with regards to how we come to and participate in the Mass are derived from the reality of Christ's divine offering of Himself through the Mass.

## 2. The Name

The Mass has gone by many names. In the New Testament, the Mass is called the "breaking of the bread" (Acts 2:42) or the "liturgy" (Acts 13:2, *leitourgountes*). The early Church used a variety of names for the Mass: The Lord's Supper" (*coena dominica*), the "Sacrifice" (*prosphora, oblatio*), "the gathering together" (*synaxis congregatio*), "the Mysteries", and (since Augustine), "the Sacrament of the Altar".

The English word "Mass" comes from the concluding formula of the Mass in Latin: "*Ite, missa est*," which literally means, "Go, it is the dismissal," but it usually translated into English as "The Mass is ended, go in peace." This word became prominent in the West after the time of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604).

The Mass in the Roman Rite is currently offered in two forms: the *Ordinary Form*, which is the form celebrated in most Catholic parishes that is based on the revision of the liturgy done in 1969; and the *Extraordinary Form*, which is the Mass celebrated according to the rubrics in place in the centuries prior to 1969, especially as codified in the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal. Most of this lesson will concern itself with the Ordinary Form, though we will draw on the Extraordinary Form for reference and clarification

## 3. What is the Mass?

Though intimately connected with the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Eucharist is something essentially different from the Sacrifice of the Mass. The Eucharist performs at once

two functions: that of a *sacrament* and that of a *sacrifice*. Though the inseparableness of the two is most clearly seen in the fact that the consecrating and sacrificial powers of the priest coincide, and consequently that the sacrament is produced only in and through the sacrifice of the Mass, the real difference between them is shown in that the sacrament is intended privately for the sanctification of the soul, whereas the sacrifice serves primarily to glorify God by adoration, thanksgiving, prayer, and expiation. The recipient of the one is God, who receives the sacrifice of His only-begotten Son; of the other, man, who receives the sacrament for his own good.

Furthermore, the unbloody Sacrifice of the Eucharistic Christ is in its nature a *transient* action, while the Sacrament of the Altar continues as something *permanent* after the sacrifice, and can even be preserved in monstrance and ciborium.

Finally, this difference also deserves mention: communion under one form only is the reception of the whole sacrament, whereas, without the use of the two forms of bread and wine (symbolizing the separation of the Body and Blood and the mystical slaying of the victim), therefore the Sacrifice of the Mass, does not take place.

**4. Parts of the Mass**

The Mass is divided up into two portions: the Liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist (these parts were formerly called the Mass of the Catechumens and the Mass of the Presanctified).The Liturgy of the Eucharist is further subdivided into three parts: the Offertory, Consecration and Communion. All of these parts together form but one act of worship.

**5. Procession**

When exactly does Mass begin? Is it when we all come in and sit down? Is it when the first hymn is sung or an introit chanted? According to the rules that govern the celebration of the Mass (the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, or *GIRM*), Mass begins with the Introductory Rites, which are meant to "make the assembled people a unified community and to prepare them properly to listen to God's Word and celebrate the Eucharist" (GIRM, 24). The Introductory Rites consist of the procession of the priest and servers into the Church and the opening prayer ("In the name of the Father…"). The *Introit*, a chanted fragment of the Psalms, is also part of these rites and is actually preferred by the GIRM over an opening hymn.

In the old days, this procession also included some prayers at the foot of the altar and instead of a "hymn" consisted of a chanted psalm antiphon, usually from Psalm 43 ("I will go to the altar of God," in Latin, "*Introibo ad altare Dei*"). Though the form of the antiphon or hymn has varied over the centuries, the introductory procession of the priest is present as far back as can be traced.

**6. Confiteor**

The penitential rite, in Latin the *Confiteor* ("I confess") comes next. The origin of the Confiteor probably goes back to the private prayers that the priest would say before offering the Mass and originally had the focus of the priest personally confessing his sinfulness to God and asking for

God's grace to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass worthily. In the early Middle Ages, this prayer became applicable not only to the priest about to offer the sacrifice but to the people about to receive the sacrament.

Interesting in both the old and the new forms of the Confiteor is that the confession is made not just to God, but to the congregation ("you my brothers and sisters") as well as to "Blessed Mary, Ever-Virgin" and "all the angels and saints." In the Extraordinary Form, St. Michael, John the Baptist and Sts. Peter and Paul are also invoked. In this confession, the priest accuses himself before God and invokes the Church Triumphant (saints and angels) and the Church Militant (the congregation) as witnesses. Confession is made to God directly and the intercession of the Communion of Saints is invoked to gain God's assistance. The people make this prayer their own, asking God to purify them to receive the sacrament, just as the priest prays to be purified to offer the sacrifice.

This rite actually contains an absolution, contained in the words, "May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to life everlasting." At this point it is appropriate to make the sign of the cross, for by common consensus this general absolution absolves us of all venial sin (but, of course, not mortal sin, nor of the punishment due to sin).

The traditional chant associated with the *Confiteor* is the *Kyrie*, one of the most ancient elements of the Mass, a prayer that retains its original Greek despite the fact that the remainder of the liturgy went to Latin in the early centuries.

**7. Gloria**

The *Gloria* is commonly called the Great Doxology and takes its Latin name from the first line of the hymn: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. It begins with the words of the angels at Christ's birth (Luke 2:14) and goes on to give praise and honor to the Blessed Trinity.

This prayer is very ancient; much of it comes directly from Scripture. Traditionally, its institution in the Mass is attributed to Pope Telesphorus (r.128-139) who ordered that on the Mass of the Lord's Nativity (Christmas) the angelic salutation should be sung prior to the offering of the sacrifice. It was gradually extended to certain other Sundays, but was reserved only to bishop, priests being allowed to sing it only during the Easter season. By around the year 1100, its usage was extended to priests and to all times of the year except during times of penance. The tone of the hymn is joyful, and as such is deemed not fitting in times of penance and supplication.

**8. Collect**

The prayers immediately after the Gloria are called the *Collect*. The meaning of the word Collect is unclear: Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) says that in this prayer the priest "collects" together the prayers of all the people. These prayers are supposed to prepare the believer to hear the Word of God and be disposed to receive the graces God wants to bestow upon us through the Mass.

## 9. The Old Testament & Epistles

The readings from the Old Testament and the Epistles[1] follow the Gloria, except during Lent when the Gloria is omitted. The readings (and the Gospel) are taken from a liturgical book called the *lectionary*. The lectionary is currently set up on a three-year cycle, so that the entire Bible is read every three years. In the patristic times, writings of the saints as well as stories of the deaths of the martyrs were also read. We know, for example, that in late second century Greece the writings of Pope St. Clement I were read on Sunday Masses at the Church of Corinth. Originally the duration of the readings seems to have fluid; St. Justin (c. 160) said the readings would go long "as long as time permits."

The person doing the readings is called a *lector*. According to the GIRM, there are few restrictions on who can be a lector. Laypersons, both men and women, have taken on the role in recent decades. Traditionally, it would have been reserved to an acolyte or someone on their way to the priesthood to read the Epistle and the Old Testament lesson.

Following the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures so masterfully developed in the Middle Ages, the readings from the Old Testament, Epistles and Gospel all are meant to have at least an allegorical similarity between them.

Originally, the Epistles were read from a separate side of the altar as the Gospels. Thus, the old books refer to the high altars as having a "Gospel Side" and an "Epistle Side." The Epistle Side is the right side facing the altar, while the Gospel Side is the left facing the altar. This is why the ambo/lectern is always on the left side of the Church as you face the altar. Originally, the Gospel would have been proclaimed from there, while the epistle would have been read from the opposite side, usually by the lector simply standing. This is still the case whenever the Extraordinary Form is celebrated.

## 10. Responsorial Psalm

The Epistles and Old Testament readings are followed by, or sometimes interspersed with, a responsorial psalm. This consists of a certain psalm, whose verses (*strophes*) are read or sung by a cantor. The refrain (*antiphon*) is a certain line of the psalm said or chanted by the congregation. As is the case with the readings, certain psalms are prescribed for certain days.

The practice of chanting responsorial psalms is very ancient and goes back to the Temple worship of ancient Israel; some suggest a precedent in the pre-Temple times of Moses and Aaron (see Deut. 27:11-13). Certain psalms, Psalm 136 for example, are clearly composed in antiphonal arrangement with parts serving as a response and others as strophes:

[1] Epistles refers to the writings of the New Testament besides the Four Gospels.

O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His mercy endures forever.
O give thanks to the God of gods, His mercy endures forever.
O give thanks to the Lord of lords, His mercy endures forever.
To Him who alone does great wonders, His mercy endures forever.

The Catechism says “The *Gospels* are the heart of all the Scriptures "because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior” (CCC 125). The Gospel reading is the most important liturgical reading of the Mass, and as such is distinguished from the Epistles readings by several factors.

- Who can read the Gospel. While any person may read from the Epistles, Old Testament and Psalms, only a minister can read the Gospel: this means a deacon, priest or bishop. No layperson is *ever* allowed to read the Gospel during Mass *under any circumstances*.

- The location of the Gospel reading is set apart. As mentioned above, for centuries the Gospel was read from a different location from the other readings. While the Epistles and Old Testament are read, the Gospel is “proclaimed.” The proper place for the proclamation of the Gospel is the ambo, which is associated with the word “mountain” and recalls the mountains upon which Jesus used to ascend to teach the people (Matt. 5:1).

- The reading of the Gospel is also accompanied by different responses. Instead of the response, “The Word of the Lord, thanks be the God,” the Church uses, “This is the Gospel of the Lord, praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.”

- The reading of the Gospel is surrounded by various other rites. If the deacon does the reading, he is blessed and prayed over by the priest before proclaiming the Gospel. The reader is accompanied to the ambo by altar servers bearing candles, signifying that Christ is the light of the world. Unlike the other readings, the reading of the Gospel is preceded by the singing of the *Alleluia*[2], the Church’s universal word of praise. Prior to the reading, all make the sign of the cross on their forehead, lips and heart, as an invocation that God would empower our minds to think on Christ, our lips to speak His words, and out hearts to love Him without reserve.

In all these things the Church attempts to set apart the Gospel as especially important, for it is here that the words of God come directly to man from the mouth of the God-Man.

**11. Homily**

The word *homily* comes from an old Greek word meaning communication with a person, or dialogue. Some use the words homily and sermon interchangeably, though technically a homily is a brief explication of the readings while a sermon is an explication of some other article of the

[2] Omitted during Lent for the same reason as the Gloria.

faith. In modern practice, the two terms are used without distinction and there is little difference between a homily and a sermon.

Traditionally, the homily has not been central to the Catholic Mass. The homily has always been a part of the Mass, and insofar as it consisted of an explication of the readings, it predates Catholicism as part of Israelite synagogue service. However, unlike in Judaism or Protestant Christianity, the sermon/homily is emphatically *not* the center of the worship. As the Sacrifice of the Mass was the climax of the Mass, the homily has always been seen as secondary to the Eucharist and traditionally Catholics were more indifferent than today as to whether their priest happened to be a good homilist or not.

That being the case, the homily is important, for it is where the faithful are to be instructed in the things of God. The discipline of homiletics in the Church goes back to the patristic age and the early Middle Ages, which has handed down to us five principles of a good homily:

- Frequent use of the Scriptures (which presumes a great familiarity with the Scriptures on the part of the homilist.
- Ability to adapt the discourse to the needs of the uninstructed, poor and simple.
- Simplicity, the aim being to impress clearly in the minds of the hearers a single idea.
- Use of familiar maxims, examples and stories from real life and the natural world.
- Intense realization; i.e., enthusiasm, excitement, genuine zeal.

When Protestantism rejected the Mass as superstitious and idolatrous, preaching necessarily became the center of the Protestant worship service and has remained so to this day. Stereotypically, Protestant ministers are known as great preachers. But this is certainly a misunderstanding: the Catholic Church has also boasted of such eminent preachers as Fulton Sheen, Cardinal Gibbons, Bl. Cardinal Newman, St. Alphonsus Ligouri and St. Anthony of Padua who are considered some of the best Christian preachers of all time.

**12. Credo**

After the Homily, if it is a Sunday Mass, the Creed is professed. The profession of the Creed was originally connected with baptism, as a preparation for that sacrament and as a means of scrutinizing the catechumen to ensure they held to all things believed by the Church. The recitation of the Nicene Creed in Mass dates back to the fifth century, where the Churches of the East adopted it as a measure to protest heresies and was not adopted in the West until the 11$^{th}$ century. It recalls the unity in faith of the congregation prior to the reception of Holy Communion.

**13. General Intercessions**

The General Intercessions are a series of prayers at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, called “general” to distinguish them from the specific intercessions made for the Pope and the Bishop during the canon of the Mass. The practice is very ancient, probably going back to Jewish synagogue worship, and is mentioned by St. Paul in 2 Tim. 2:1-2: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all

who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." The practice is also mentioned by St. Justin in his *Apology* (c. 150).

In the Middle Ages these prayers became silent, offered up to God in union with the Eucharistic sacrifice as the intentions of the Mass, only restored to their current place in recent decades. Traditionally, the General Intercessions are meant to be prayers for political authorities, those in distress, the sick and those who have died.

**14. Offertory**

The Offertory marks the beginning of the Mass of the Presanctified/Liturgy of the Eucharist. At this point, all catechumens would have left the Church prior to the Eucharistic liturgy. The Offertory refers to the offering of the bread and wine to God prior to their consecration. Currently, the money collected from the congregation is also offered at this point, although this was not traditionally part of the rite. The prayers of the priest during the offertory invoke God's blessing on him and ask that He receive the bread and wine to be consecrated. "Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father…"

This part of the Mass is also sometimes referred to as the "Preparation of the Gifts."

**15. Anaphora**

The *anaphora*, more commonly called the Eucharistic Prayer, begins the period of Consecration. It begins with the phrase, "The Lord be with you…" The phrase, "Lift up your hearts" (Lat. *sursum corda*) denotes that we are now being elevated beyond our mundane realm and are ascending into the heavenly worship around God's throne. In this part of the liturgy, the priest represents Christ (and sacramentally Christ truly acts through him), the altar servers around the altar represent the seraphim around the throne of God, and we represent the cherubim participating in the heavenly worship. Innumerable hosts of saints and angels are present through the Spirit and participate in glorifying God through the offering of His Divine Son.

There are four primary Eucharistic Prayers. Eucharistic Prayer I (called the Roman Canon) is the oldest[3], the other being more recent additions. Eucharist Prayer II is the shortest and is the most common in the United States. These prayers contain recollections of the types of the Eucharist in the Old Testament, prayers for the pope and the bishop, and various other prayers and gestures (like hand-washing, etc.) Within the Eucharistic Prayer, there are several distinct sub-elements:

> <u>Sanctus</u>
>
> The Sanctus consists of the refrain, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," and has the twofold effect of reminding us of God's holiness and the majesty of the sacrifice of the Mass, as well as recalling to us our mystical representation of the angels, who in the Old Testament chant this refrain endlessly around God's throne (see Isaiah 6:3).

[3] Eucharistic Prayer II is based on some ancient prayers than in themselves may predate Eucharistic Prayer I, but Eucharistic Prayer I was included in the Mass for a much longer time.

Epiclesis

The epiclesis if the calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts. In our Eucharistic Prayer II, it is found in the words, "Lord, let Your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ." In the Eastern Church, some theologians believe that transubstantiation occurs at this moment, while in the West, the words of consecration have traditionally been favored.

Words of Consecration

This is often called the "Institution Narrative," but it is more properly understood sacramentally as the Consecration form of the Eucharist. It consists of the priest repeating the words of Christ at the Last Supper: "Take and eat, this is My Body; take and drink, this is My Blood." Transubstantiation has taken place, Christ emerges in the sacrament, and as recognition of this fact, the priest first elevates the Sacred Host (called the *Major Elevation*[4] and dating to the 13th century), then genuflects before the Sacred Species on the altar.

Mysterium Fidei

Immediately following the consecration comes the proclaiming of the "Mystery of Faith," in which Christ's true Presence is affirmed. The address to God in the Mysterium Fidei is meant to be taken as a direct address to Christ Himself present in the sacrament.

Minor Elevation

This elevation is where the priest raises the host and chalice and says, "Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit…" This elevation is quite ancient and predates the Major Elevation by several centuries. It is called Minor because originally it was done by the priest facing the altar and as such would not have been seen by the people. This doxology is concluded with what is known as the *Great Amen* and denotes the end of the Eucharistic Prayer.

**16. Pater Noster**

The people now stand and pray the Lord's Prayer. This prayer, as part of the liturgy, is very ancient. As no definite date can be ascertained for its addition, it seems it may be of apostolic origin and connected with the Eucharist by the phrase "give us this day our daily bread," always seen as a reference to the supernatural (Lat., *supersubstantialem*) bread of the Eucharist. It is mentioned as early as the *Didache* (c. 70 AD); its present place in the liturgy, prior to the Fraction rite, was fixed by Pope St. Gregory the Great (d. 604).

[4] Instituted in France to combat the heresy of Berengarius, who doubted the Real Presence.

**17. Pax**

The passing of the peace was originally used by the bishop in welcoming the faithful before the Collect and the *pax vobiscum* was preserved as the liturgy organically developed over the ages. It is connected with the "Kiss of Peace" that, in the Roman liturgy, always came after the Pater Noster and was closely connected with the Eucharist. It is a very ancient practice that is mentioned by Pope St. Innocent I (416), St. Cyril of Jerusalem and is first encountered very early on, in St. Justin Martyr, who writes: "When we have completed the prayers we salute one another with a kiss" (Apol., I, 65). The peace was instituted as a way to fulfill Christ's command in Matthew 5:23-24: *If therefore thou offer thy gift at the altar, and there thou remember that thy brother hath anything against thee; leave there thy offering before the altar, and go first to be reconciled to thy brother: and then coming thou shalt offer thy gift*. Pope Innocent I spoke of it as a connected with the Eucharist by way of a preparation and assent to the Holy Mysteries: "[By it] the people give their assent to all things already performed in the mysteries" (*ad Decentius*, c. 416).

It ought to be pointed out that the Peace is optional, according to the GIRM, and may be omitted for various reasons or for no reason at all. The Peace ought never to be an occasion that detracts from the solemnity of the Mass; gestures such as hugging, high-fiving, crossing aisles to greet people, or engaging in trivial chatter are inappropriate. Pope Benedict XVI recommends a formal handshake to the person to the immediate right and left.

**18. Agnus Dei (Fraction Rite)**

The hymn Agnus Dei is chanted during the breaking of the host (fraction) by the priest. It recalls Christ's role as the sacrificial Lamb of God (Rev. 5:6). Meanwhile, the host is split, symbolically representing the breaking of Christ's body on the cross. Like the *Gloria*, it originally appeared in Rome at the Christmas Mass and was later extended to all Masses.

**19. "Ecce, Agnus Dei"**

The broken host is held aloft for the veneration of the faithful. It is again identified as Christ, the slain Lamb of God, by the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God (*Ecce, agnus Dei*) who takes away the sins of the world." With the response, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof," the congregation echoes the faithful words of the humble centurion whose servant Jesus healed. The priest then self-communicates, followed by the deacons, servers and (if applicable), Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. According to the GIRM, nobody else is allowed to communicate until the priest self-communicates. This moment is meant for adoration of the Eucharistic Lord.

**20. Communion**

The Communion rite begins the third section of the Eucharistic Liturgy, where the faithful are

strengthened and sanctified by reception of the Body and Blood of the Lord. The faithful may receive communion standing or kneeling, on the hand or on the tongue. While standing in the hand is the normative practice in the United States, kneeling on the tongue is the more traditional posture and that practiced by the majority of Catholics throughout the history. The faithful are free to receive communion in which ever posture they wish.[5] One is free to receive the host and partake of the chalice, though partaking of the host alone is enough to receive the full grace of the sacrament, inasmuch as one who receives even one particle of the host receives the whole Christ.

In the Extraordinary Form, holy communion must be received kneeling and only on the tongue. Though the Ordinary Form permits reception standing or in the hand, in recent years the Vatican seems to want to renew the older form of reception as most appropriate to the dignity of the Mass.

**21. Post-Communion Prayer & Dismissal**

The Mass concludes with the post-communion prayer and the dismissal, "Go in the peace, the Mass is ended," (in Latin, *Ite, missa est*, from where the Mass takes its name). Private devotions after this point are appropriate and encouraged. Traditional devotions after Mass include the St. Michael Prayer, the Rosary, Our Lady of Perpetual Help devotions, the Litany of St. Jude, various prayers of thanksgiving.

**<u>For Further Reading</u>:**

Ps. 136
Isa. 6:1-4
Matt. 5:23-24
2 Tim. 1:1-8
Rev. 5:6-14
Arch. Fulton Sheen, *The Mass*
Dr. Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper*
*Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 136-1199, 1322-1419
The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*
Fr. Alfred McBride, *Celebrating the Mass* (1999)
Jeffrey Pinyan, *Praying the Mass* (2009).

[5] There are exceptions: if one receives kneeling, reception must be on the tongue.