

Upward mobility

Now, as the priest has lifted up the gifts, he invites us to "Lift up your hearts." This is a powerful image, and you'll find it in Christian liturgies throughout the world and since the earliest times. We lift our hearts to heaven. In the words of the Apocalypse (see Rev 1:10; 4:1-2), we are taken up in the spirit – to heaven. From now on, we are saying, we will look at reality by faith and not by sight.

So what do we see in this heaven? We recognise that all around us are the angels and the saints. We sing the song that, according to many accounts, the angels and saints sing before heaven's throne (see Rev 4:8; Is 6:2-3). In the West we call it the "Sanctus," or "Holy, Holy, Holy"; in the East, it's the "Trisagion," or "Thrice-Holy Hymn."

Then comes the climax of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the great Eucharistic Prayer (or Anaphora). This is where it becomes clear that the New Covenant is not a book. It's an action, and that action is the Eucharist. There are many Eucharistic Prayers in use throughout the Church, but all contain the same elements:

The Epiclesis. This is when the priest places his hands over the gifts and calls down the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful encounter with heaven, more richly appreciated in the East.

The Narrative of Institution is the moment when the Spirit and the Word transform the elements from bread and wine into the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Now, the priest relates the drama of the Last Supper, when Jesus made provision for the renewal of His covenant sacrifice through all time. What Exodus 12 was to the Passover liturgy, the Gospels are for the Eucharistic Prayer – but with a major difference. The words of the new Passover "effect what they signify." When the priest speaks the words of institution – "This is My body ... This is the cup of My blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant" – he is not merely narrating, he is speaking *in the person of Christ*, Who is the principal celebrant of the Mass. By the sacrament of Holy Orders, a man is changed in his very being; as priest, he becomes "another Christ." Jesus ordained the Apostles and their successors to celebrate the Mass when He said: "Do this... in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor 11:25). Note that Jesus commanded them to "do this," and not "write this" or "read this."

Remembrance. We use the English words "Remembrance" and "Memory" to describe the next section of the Eucharistic Prayer, but these words hardly do justice to the terms in the original

language. In the Old Testament, for example, we often read that God "remembered His covenant." Well, it's not as if He could ever forget His covenant; but at certain times, for the benefit of His people, He renewed it, He re-presented it, He re-enacted it. That's what He does, through His priest, in the remembrance of the Mass. He makes His New Covenant new once again.

Offering. The Mass's "memory" is not imaginary. It has flesh; it is Jesus in His glorified humanity, and He is our offering. "Father, calling to mind the death Your Son endured for our salvation... we offer You in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice" (*Eucharistic Prayer III*).

Intercessions. Then, with Jesus Himself, we pray to the Father for the living and the dead, for the whole Church and the whole world.

Doxology. The end of the Eucharistic Prayer is a dramatic moment. We call it a "doxology," which is Greek for "word of glory." The priest lifts up the chalice and the host, which he now refers to as *Him*. This is Jesus, and "Through Him, with Him, in Him, all glory and honour is Yours, almighty Father, forever and ever." Our "Amen!" here should be resounding; it is traditionally called "The Great Amen." In the fourth century, St Jerome reported that, in Rome when the Great Amen was proclaimed, all the pagan temples trembled.

Family matters

We follow the Eucharistic Prayer with the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us. We find it in the ancient liturgies and it should have richer meaning for us in the context of the Mass – and especially in the context of the Mass as heaven on earth. We have renewed our baptism as children of God, Whom we can call "Our Father." We are now in heaven with Him, having lifted up our hearts. We have hallowed His name by praying the Mass. By uniting our sacrifice with Jesus' eternal sacrifice, we have seen God's will done "on earth as it is in heaven." We have before us Jesus, our "daily bread," and this bread will "forgive us our trespasses," because Holy Communion wipes away all venial sins. We have known mercy, then, and so we will show mercy, forgiving "those who trespass against us." And through Holy Communion we will know new strength over temptations and evil. The Mass fulfils the Lord's Prayer, perfectly, word for word.

So the "Communion Rite" begins, and we shouldn't miss the original power of the word *communion*. In Jesus' time, the word (in Greek, *koinonia*) was used most often to describe a family bond. With Communion, we renew our bond with the eternal family, the Family Who is

God, and with God's family on earth, the Church. We express our communion with the Church in the Sign of Peace. In this ancient gesture, we fulfil Jesus' command that we make peace with our neighbour before we approach the altar (see Mt 5:24).

Our next prayer, the "Lamb of God," recalls the Passover sacrifice and the "mercy" and "peace" of the new Passover. The priest, then, breaks the host and lifts it up – a Lamb "standing, as if slain" (Rev 5:6) – and calls out the words of John the Baptist: "This is the Lamb of God" (see Jn 1:36). And we can only respond in the words of the Roman centurion: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word..." (Mt 8:8).

Then we receive Him in Holy Communion. We receive *Him*, Whom we praised in the Gloria and proclaimed in the creed! We receive *Him*, before Whom we swore our solemn oath! We receive *Him*, Who is the New Covenant awaited through all of human history! When Christ comes at the end of time, He will not have one more drop more glory than He has at this moment, when we consume *all of Him!* In the Eucharist we receive what we will *be* for all eternity, when we are taken up to heaven to join with the heavenly throng in the marriage supper of the Lamb. At Holy Communion, we are already there. This is not a metaphor. This is the cold, calculated, precise metaphysical truth that was taught by Jesus Christ.

You're heaven-sent

After so much that's so heavy duty, the Mass seems to end too abruptly – with a blessing and "The Mass is ended. Go in peace." It seems strange that the word "Mass" should come from these hasty final words: *Ite, missa est* (literally, "Go, it is sent"). But the ancients understood that the Mass was a sending-forth. That last line is not so much a *dismissal* as a *commissioning*. We have united ourselves to Christ's sacrifice. We leave Mass now in order to live the mystery, the sacrifice, we have just celebrated, through the splendour of ordinary life in the home and in the world.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the role of Scripture in the Mass?
2. Why is order, with its set phrases and gestures, important in the Liturgy?
3. What are some practical ways of being more attentive during the celebration of Mass?
4. Why is the Mass so important in the life of the Church?

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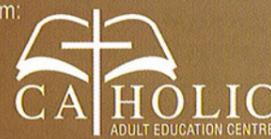
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Many people attend Mass without really understanding it. In this article DR SCOTT HAHN writes about the parts of the Mass, their significance and meaning and the development of the Liturgy from the early history of the Church.

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Some people, romantics at heart, like to think that early Christian worship was purely spontaneous and improvised. They like to imagine the first believers so overflowing with enthusiasm that praise and thanksgiving just overflowed into profound prayer as the Church gathered to break bread. After all, who needs a missal in order to shout, "I love you"?

Once I believed that. Study of the Scriptures and Tradition, however, led me to see the good sense of order in worship. Gradually, I found myself (while still a Protestant) drawn to liturgy and trying to construct a liturgy out of the words of Scripture. Little did I know it had already been done.

As early as St Paul, we see the Church's concern with ritual precision and liturgical etiquette. I believe there's a good reason for this. I beg the patience of my romantic friends as I say that order and routine are not necessarily bad things. In fact, they are indispensable to a godly and peaceful life. Without schedules and routines we could accomplish little in our workday. Without set phrases, what would our human relationships be? I've yet to meet parents who tire of hearing their children repeat that ancient phrase, "Thank you." I've yet to meet the spouse who's sick of hearing, "I love you."

The rites of the Christian liturgy are the set phrases that have proven themselves over time: the thank-you of God's children, the I-love-you of Christ's spouse, the Church. The liturgy is the habit that makes us highly effective, not just in "spiritual life," but in life generally, since life must be lived in a world that's made and redeemed by God.

Liturgy engages the whole person: body, soul and spirit. I remember the first time I attended a Catholic liturgical event, a vespers service at a Byzantine seminary. My Calvinist background and training had not prepared me for the experience – the incense and icons, the prostrations and bows, the chant and the bells. All my senses were taken up. Afterward a seminarian asked me, "What do you think?" All I could say was, "Now I know why God gave me a body: to worship the Lord with His people in liturgy." Catholics don't just hear the Gospel. In the liturgy we hear, see, smell, and taste it.

Halving a good time

In this article, we'll walk step by step through the liturgy to see how each element "works" – where it comes from and what it's for. Though we have space to treat only a few of the major details, these should be enough to help us begin to contemplate the Mass and begin to discover its inner logic. For, unless we understand both the parts and the whole, the Mass can become mindless routine, without heartfelt participation;

and that's the sort of routine that gives routine a bad name.

First, we should understand that the Mass is really divided in two: the "Liturgy of the Word" and the "Liturgy of the Eucharist". These halves are further divided into specific rituals. In the Latin Church, the Liturgy of the Word includes the entrance, the introductory rites, the penitential rite and the readings from Scripture. The Liturgy of the Eucharist could be marked off in four sections: the offertory, the Eucharistic Prayer, the communion rite and the concluding rite. Though the actions are many, the Mass is one offering and that is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which renews our covenant with God the Father.

Cross purposes

Among the early Christians, the Sign of the Cross was probably the most universal expression of faith. It appears often in the documents of that period. In most places, the custom was simply to trace the cross upon the forehead. Some writers (such as St Jerome and St Augustine) describe Christians tracing the cross on the forehead, then the lips and then the heart, as modern Western Catholics do just before the reading of the Gospel. Great saints also testify to the tremendous power of the sign. St Cyprian of Carthage, in the third century, wrote that "in the ... Sign of the Cross is all virtue and power... In this Sign of the Cross is salvation for all who are marked on their foreheads" (a reference, by the way, to Revelation 7:3 and 14:1). A century later, St Athanasius declared that "by the Sign of the Cross all magic is stopped, and all witchcraft brought to nothing. Satan is powerless before the cross of Jesus Christ."

The Sign of the Cross is the most profound gesture we make. It is the mystery of the Gospel in a moment. It is the Christian faith summarised in a single gesture. When we cross ourselves, we renew the covenant that began with our baptism. With our words, we proclaim the Trinitarian faith into which we were baptised ("In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"). With our hand, we proclaim our redemption by the cross of Jesus Christ. The greatest sin of human history – the crucifixion of the Son of God – became the greatest act of merciful love and divine power. The cross is the means by which we are saved, by which we become partakers in the divine nature (see 2 Pet 1:4).

We also renew the solemn oath of our baptism. Making the Sign of the Cross, then, is like swearing on the Bible in a court of law. We promise that we have come to Mass to offer testimony. So we are not spectators in worship; we are active participants, we are witnesses, and we swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help us, God.

A rite for wrongs

If we're on the witness stand, then who's on trial? The Penitential Rite makes it clear: we are. The earliest liturgical guidelines we have, the *Didache*, say that an act of confession should precede our participation in the Eucharist. The beautiful thing about the Mass, though, is that no one rises to accuse us but we ourselves. "I confess to Almighty God...that I have sinned through my own fault."

We have sinned. We can't deny that. "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1Jn 1:9). Moreover, says the Good Book, even the just man falls seven times a day (see Prov 24:16). We are no exceptions, and honesty demands that



we acknowledge our guilt. Even our small sins are serious matters because each one is an offence against a God whose greatness is immeasurable. So, in the Mass, we plead guilty and then throw ourselves on the mercy of heaven's court. In the *Kyrie*, we ask mercy of each of the three divine persons in the Trinity: "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." We don't make excuses or rationalise. We ask forgiveness and we hear the message of mercy. If one word captures the meaning of the Mass, it's "mercy."

The "Lord, have mercy" has endured since the earliest Christian liturgies. In fact, even in the Latin West it is often preserved in the more ancient Greek form: *Kyrie, eleison*. In some liturgies of the East, the congregation repeats the *Kyrie* in response to a longer litany begging favours from God. Among the Byzantines, these petitions overwhelmingly ask for peace: "In peace, let us pray to the Lord... For peace from on high... For peace in the whole world..."

G-L-O-R-I-A

We pray for peace, and within seconds we proclaim our prayer's fulfilment: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth." This prayer has been around since at least the second century. Its opening acclamation comes from the song the angels sang at Jesus' birth (Lk 2:14) and the following lines echo the angel's praises of God's power from the Book of Revelation (especially Rev 15:3-4).

We praise God immediately for the blessings we just prayed for. That's our testimony of God's power. That's His glory. Jesus said: "Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (Jn 14:13-14).

The Gloria cries out with the joy, confidence and hope that have always marked believers. Our sacrifice is an urgent plea for deliverance, but at the same time it is a celebration and thanksgiving for that deliverance. That's the faith of someone who knows God's providential care. That's the Gloria.

The full-Gospel Church

The defining moment of the Liturgy of the Word is, of course, the proclamation of the Word of God. On Sundays, this will usually include an Old Testament reading, the singing or recitation of a Psalm and a reading from the New Testament letters, all of which builds to the reading of the Gospel. All told, that's a powerhouse of Scripture. Catholics who attend Mass daily hear almost the entire Bible read to them in the course of three years – and then there are the veins of Scriptural gold embedded in all the other prayers of the Mass... Don't ever let people tell you that the Church doesn't call Catholics to be "Bible Christians."

In fact, the Bible's "natural habitat" is in the liturgy. "Faith comes by hearing," St Paul said (Rom 10:17). Notice that he did not say, "Faith comes by reading." In the early centuries of the Church, there were no printing presses. Most people could not afford to have the Gospels copied out by hand, and many people couldn't read anyway. So where did Christians receive the Gospel? In the Mass – and then, as now, they got the full Gospel.



The readings you hear at Mass are pre-programmed for a three-year cycle in a book called the lectionary. This book is an effective antidote to a tendency I had, as a Protestant preacher, to target my favourite texts and preach on them again and again. I could go years without touching some of the books of the Old Testament. This should never be a problem for Catholics who regularly attend Mass.

We can't be too attentive during the readings. They are a normal and essential preparation for our Holy Communion with Jesus. One of the great Scripture scholars of the early Church, Origen (third century), urged Christians to respect Christ's presence in the Gospel as they respect His presence in the Host:

"You who are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how you protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost. For you believe, and correctly, that you are answerable if anything falls from there by neglect. But if you are so careful to preserve

His body, and rightly so, how do you think that there is less guilt to have neglected God's word than to have neglected His body?" (*On Exodus*, 13.3)

Seventeen centuries later, the Second Vatican Council echoed this ancient teaching for our own time: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scripture just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body" (*Dei Verbum* 21).

"No one," said Origen, "understands in heart... unless he be open-minded and totally intent." Does that describe you and me when we hear the readings at Mass? We need to be particularly attentive during the readings because, from the beginning of the Mass, you and I are under oath. By receiving the Word – which, we acknowledge, comes from God – we are agreeing to be bound by the Word. As a result, we are liable to judgement depending on how well we live up to the readings of the Mass. In the Old Covenant, to hear the Law was to agree to live by the Law – or receive the curses that came with disobedience. In the New Covenant, too, we are bound by what we hear.

The need to heed the creed

The Liturgy of the Word proceeds, on Sundays, to the homily (or sermon) and the creed. In the homily, the priest or deacon offers us a commentary on God's inspired word. Homilies should draw from the Scriptures of the day, lighting up the obscure passages and pointing out practical applications for ordinary life. Homilies don't have to entertain us. Just as Jesus comes to us in humble, tasteless wafers, so the Holy Spirit sometimes works through a monotone, lacklustre preacher.

After the homily, we recite the Nicene Creed, which is the faith distilled into just a few lines. The words of the creed are precise, with a diamond-like clarity and cut. Compared to prayers like the Gloria, the Nicene Creed appears dispassionate, but appearances can be deceptive. As the late great Dorothy Sayers said, the drama is in the dogma. For here we proclaim doctrines for which Christian citizens of the Roman Empire suffered imprisonment and death. In the fourth century, the empire nearly exploded into civil war over the doctrines of Jesus' divinity and His oneness with the Father. New heresies arose and spread like a cancer through the Church, threatening the life of the body. It took the great councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) – engaging some of the greatest minds and souls in Church history – to give basic Catholic belief this

definitive formulation, though most of the lines of the creed had been in common usage since at least the third century. After those councils, many churches in the East required the faithful to sing the creed every week – not just recite it – because this was indeed good news, lifesaving news.

The creed is the "faith of our fathers" that is "living still." When we recite the creed on Sunday, we publicly accept this scriptural faith as objective truth. We enter the drama of the dogma, for which our ancestors were willing to die. We join these ancestors, then, as we recite the "prayers of the faithful," our petitions. The creed empowers us to enter into the intercessory ministry of the saints. At this point, the Liturgy of the Word comes to an end, and we enter the mysteries of the Eucharist.

Give Him an offering He can't refuse

The Liturgy of the Eucharist starts with the offertory, and the offertory bespeaks our commitment. We bring bread, wine and money to support the Church's work. In the early Church, the faithful actually baked the bread and pressed the wine for the celebration; at the offertory they brought it forward. The point is this: we offer ourselves and all that we have. Not because we're so special, but because we know the Lord can take what is temporal and make it eternal, take what is human and make it divine. The Second Vatican Council spoke powerfully of the offering of the laity: "Their work, prayers and apostolic endeavours, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labour, their mental and physical relaxation... all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. During the celebration of the Eucharist these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord's body. Thus as worshippers whose every deed is holy, the lay faithful consecrate the world itself to God" (*Lumen Gentium* 34).

Everything we have goes on the altar, to be made holy in Christ. The priest makes the connection explicit as he pours the water and wine into the chalices: "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, Who humbled Himself to share in our humanity." This mingling is a rich symbol, suggesting the union of Christ's divine and human nature, the blood and water that poured forth from His side on the cross, and the union of our own gifts with the Saviour's perfect gift of Himself. That's an offer the Father cannot refuse.

