



Opening Question:

What is your experience of the Mass?

In the United States, worship in the Catholic Church is different. Different from many other Christian groups. The Mass has a tight structure that only allows for limited variation. Many outsiders might see one Mass is just like another.

So, why do we worship in this way? The Mass evolved from the beginning of the Church. Many of its parts have ancient roots. But, the Mass also has a flow that can appeal to modern sensibilities. It has a call and response prayer flow that some scholars label "sacred dialog."

Overview of the Mass

Let's take a look at the Mass overall. We can divide the service into four parts:

- An Introduction
- The Liturgy of the Word
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist
- A short conclusion

Each one of these sections focuses on a piece of furniture in the Sanctuary.

Introductory Rite

The priest, called the celebrant, and worship assistants enter in a procession. Sometimes music leaders and the congregation sing an entrance hymn. Once the celebrant is standing at his chair, he greets the people with a brief welcome and the sign of the cross. Then he prepares the people for worship with prayers that seek God's forgiveness.

One of these can be the repeated phrase "Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy." Like many other prayers found in the Mass, this phrase goes back to the early Church when it was first recited in Greek. You might have heard it as the phrase "Kyrie eleison." The congregation can also



ask for God's mercy in a prayer that begins "I confess to Almighty God..."

Then, on Sundays outside of Advent and Lent, we say or sing a song of praise called the Gloria. Again, this prayer has ancient roots we can trace back before the fourth century.

After the Gloria, the celebrant prays a short prayer that lays out many of the themes for the celebration. Notice we are standing throughout the Introduction. This is the ancient posture of prayer.

Origin of the Liturgy of the Word

Where did the Liturgy of the Word come from? Many scholars think it evolved from the Sabbath service. One of the earliest written references to the service came from Acts chapter 13.

On the Sabbath, Paul and his companions entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak."

Acts 13:14b-15

Then, in Acts 13:16-41, St. Paul used this opportunity to preach about Jesus.

Let's take a moment to notice the flow of the

service: the community gathered, Scripture was read, and someone gave a commentary on the reading. This is just like our Liturgy of the Word.

However, Paul's words had a reaction. A week later, the local leadership rejected the Good News. So, again in Acts chapter 13,

Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

"I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Acts 13:46-48 (Isaiah 49:6)

St. Paul established new communities especially in the Aegean basin for excommunicated Jewish Christians and Gentile believers. We can assume these local churches acted as "alternative synagogues for Christians." Many scholars hold the local congregations simply adopted the pattern of the synagogue service for their own ends. Then, they added it to the breaking of the bread on Sunday morning to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord.

The Liturgy of the Word: the Readings

After the opening prayer, we begin the Liturgy of the Word. The focus shifts from the celebrant's chair to the lectern. We also sit for the bible readings. This is the posture for listening.

On Sundays, there are three readings before the gospel. One of these readings is from the book of Psalms, the hymns of the Temple in Jerusalem. A reader or musician leads us in a "call and response" style of prayer for the psalm. The reading before the psalm is a passage from the Old Testament except during Easter season when it's from Acts of the Apostles. This first reading usually matches the theme of the gospel. The reading after the psalm is from the epistles or letters from the New Testament. After the three readings, we stand for the gospel as

a sign of faith. As Christians, we stand up for what we believe in, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Cycles

You might notice different Sundays have different gospel readings. Indeed, Sunday Mass readings have been divided into three cycles. Each cycle covers one year. Cycle A is the gospel of Matthew. Cycle B is the gospel of Mark. Cycle C is the gospel of Luke. The gospel of John is interspersed over the three years of readings.

The Liturgy of the Word: Conclusion

After the gospel, we sit for the homily. This is usually a short commentary on the readings. It can also address a particular need of the people.

After a short pause for reflection, we stand to recite a statement of faith. This is either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed. Either creed professes our belief in the Trinity and its activity in the creation and salvation of the world.

We end the Liturgy of the Word by standing for the Prayer of the Faithful, also known as the Universal Prayer. This is a list of petitions for the needs of the Church and the world.

Origins of the Liturgy of the Eucharist

Now that we've covered the Liturgy of the Word, let's turn our attention to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Where did it come from? It's no surprise we find its roots in the Last Supper. At this meal,

Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "This is my body," he said. "It is offered up for you. Do this in memory of me."

After they ate, he did the same with the cup of wine. "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. It is poured out for you."

Luke 22:19-20

Notice Jesus spoke the phrase "This is my body" at the beginning of the meal while he said "This is the cup of the new covenant" at the end. In other words, the Words of Institution acted as bookends for a community meal. The congregation would gather together at dawn on Sunday morning to celebrate the Lord's resurrection. Believers would

bring food to share with others like a potluck and produce to share with the community's poor.

Soon, however, there were problems in this arrangement. In First Corinthians, St. Paul criticized the community for its lax attitude and lack of unity.

When you meet together, you don't really celebrate the Lord's Supper. You even start eating before everyone gets to the meeting, and some of you go hungry, while others get drunk.

1 Corinthians 11:20-21

Many scholars believe the early Church did away with the community meal portion because of such abuse. While there was no longer a potluck, many of its themes remained: presenting the labor of the community to share, the words of institution in prayer, and signs of unity in prayer along with the feeding of the faithful.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist:

Presentation of the Gifts

Now the focus of the Mass falls upon the table, called the altar. The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the presentation of bread and wine. It also includes a collection from the community. The simple food and the monetary donations from the faithful represent our meager offerings to God. We sit during this beginning phase of the liturgy.

Liturgy of the Eucharist:

Eucharistic Prayer

The Eucharistic Prayer is a high point in the Mass because it realizes the definitive presence of the Risen Christ. We stand for prayer during the introduction. There is a call and response between the celebrant and us. Then, the celebrant prays the preface. Finally, we sing or recite the "Holy, Holy, Holy" declaration.

We kneel in worship for the rest of the Eucharistic Prayer. The body of the prayer consists of three parts. First, the celebrant calls for the Spirit to descend upon the bread and wine and transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ. This step also includes the words of Institution:

"This is my body...this is my blood."

It is at this point, the celebrant becomes an instrument for Christ, speaking the words in the person of Christ or known in Latin as "in persona Christi."

In the second step, we together affirm the presence of Christ on the altar in a declaration called the Mystery of Faith. This phrase comes from a verse in the New Testament. In the third step, the celebrant prays for the community, the Church and the world.

The prayer ends with the Great Amen. The celebrant lifts up the consecrated bread and the cup, then proclaims the phrase that begins, "through him, and with him and in him..." We respond by saying or singing "Amen."

Liturgy of the Eucharist: Signs of Unity

At this point, we stand for prayer.

Now that we are gathered and the Risen Lord is truly present, we say or sing the Lord's Prayer. This and the subsequent prayers emphasize the unity present. We express our togetherness with each other in the Sign of Peace and in our petition for the Lord's mercy found in the Lamb of God. Then, we kneel to realize that mercy. The celebrant raises the consecrated host and says "Behold the Lamb of God..." We respond with the phrase, "Lord, I am not worthy..." And we together process pew by pew to receive Communion.

Now, we are truly one with the Lord and, through the Lord, with each other. The Church, the Body of Christ, is fully present.

Liturgy of the Eucharist: Closing Prayer

When we return to our places and the worship vessels are cleaned and put away, we stand for the closing prayer,

Closing Rite

The Mass ends with a blessing from the celebrant and the recessional, which can be accompanied with a hymn.

Seasonal Colors

Before we end this discussion on the Mass, there is the matter of seasonal colors.

Purple denotes a time of preparation: the four Sundays of Advent that prepare us for Christmas and the forty days of Lent that point us towards Easter.

White denotes celebration: Christmas Time and Easter Time.

Red denotes feasts of suffering like Passion Sunday and Pentecost.

Green indicates Sundays outside of Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter. Green denotes growth in faith.

Let's conclude by addressing our original question. Why do we worship with the Mass? We have a consistent format that has its roots in the early Church. Yet, it also has the possibility to engage us as long as we remember our purpose at Mass: to adore our Lord, to hear his Word, and to be fed by him. And, above all, to make his Body, the Church, fully manifest.

Closing Question:

What is the quality of your worship at Mass? How can you improve it?

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