The Roman Catholic Mass Explained

"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also 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." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

One of the most important things we do as Catholics is the celebration of the Mass. Unfortunately, our understanding of the Mass tends to be poor. In the early church, the Mass, called "The Breaking of the Bread" in the Book of Acts and the New Testament Letters, was celebrated in private homes. The early church was small and was persecuted so Mass was celebrated secretly in homes. After the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D., Christians were no longer persecuted. When it became the religion of the state, much larger worship spaces were needed. As the state religion, Mass was done in Latin, the language of the people.

Over time, the Roman Empire fell and the regular people no longer spoke Latin. Mass continued to be done in Latin as the "language of the church" and bibles were only available in Latin. This meant that the people could not understand the words the priest said. So, Mass became something the priest did while the people prayed devotions, like the Rosary. Since the people did not understand Latin, bells were rung at the consecration to let the people know what was going on.

Perhaps the most visible change made by reforms the Second Vatican Council called for Mass to be said in the vernacular language (the language of the local people). (Paragraph three of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium) Now, the people understand the words of the Mass but may be lacking in a full understanding of the Mass.

Thus, it seems appropriate to provide some basic teaching on the parts of the Mass and the meaning of those parts. First, we should discuss the purpose of the Mass. The Mass, as worship, is designed to give praise to God. The "opposite" view is that we gather for Mass to make ourselves feel good. Without question, we give praise to God in our Mass. But I do not believe that the Mass is meant to make us feel good about ourselves all the time. Should it make us feel good? Yes. However, we each have our crosses to bear and the Mass speaks differently to different people. What speaks to one person may seem irrelevant to one person may be of the utmost importance to the next person. Hopefully, this explanation of the Mass will help you appreciate the Mass more fully.

To understand what the Mass is about it is important that we understand what it means for the people in the pews to be active participants in the Mass and what the role of the presider is.

Active participation begins with external acts. Thus, the congregation are called to share in the singing and the appropriate responses. Mass is not a spectator event were the presider does everything. The people sing. Lectors share in the readings and altar servers assist the priest. Our posture is part of active participation. We stand in union, we sit as we listen, and we kneel as we offer the Eucharistic Prayer as a sign of humbling ourselves before God. Even periods of silence are part of our active participation. The silence is a chance for us to reflect on how God is speaking to us.

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Active participation goes beyond our external acts. As active participants we are called to attentively listen to the readings and homily and reflect upon their meaning in our lives. We are called not to just watch as the priest presides. As presider, the role of the priest is not to do everything himself. Rather, the priest as presider leads the people as they offer their worship.

There are two main parts to the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word begins after the opening prayer (collect) and continues through the readings, homily, creed, and Prayers of the Faithful. The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the preparation of the gifts and concludes with the Prayer after Communion. Before we begin the Liturgy of the Word, though, we have some introductory rights. The outline presented below is taken from the General Instruction for the Roman Missal (GIRM) paragraphs 46 - 90.

I. Introductory Rites - The introductory rites are not just something we do to get the Mass started. The gathering rites, beginning with the procession and opening hymn are meant to draw us together as a community and to open ourselves to the spirit. The GIRM says the gathering hymn's primary purpose is to draw us into unity. We must be welcoming to each person, friend or stranger to have unity.

1. Procession - In the Procession, the priest, (deacon), servers and other ministers enter, preferably while a hymn is being sung. The act of processing can serve as a symbol of gathering together to worship God. The entrance hymn serves two purposes. One, it gives praise to God. Secondly, by the act of all the people singing it together, promotes the unity of the congregation. The congregation should not be seen as a group of individual people but rather as a people gathered together as one.

2. Gathering at the Altar and Greeting - The priest and ministers bow the altar as a sign of reverence (genuflect if the Tabernacle is nearby) and the priest (and deacon) kiss the altar as a further sign of reverence. The priest begins by making the Sign of the Cross and greeting the people (and offering a short introduction).

3. Penitential Rite - In the Penitential Rite, we are called to reflect on the fact that we are not perfect in and of ourselves. Rather, we rely on God's help and seek his mercy for those times when we stumble and fail to do good (God's will). It's about praising God for his mercy upon our sins. During the Easter Season, the Penitential Rite may be replaced by a sprinkling rite.

4. Gloria - The Gloria is an ancient hymn of praise, giving glory to God as the Lamb of God. It is omitted during the seasons of Advent and Lent.

5. Opening Prayer (Collect) - The opening prayer is a different prayer for each Sunday and Holy Day of the year. There are also specific prayers assigned for many of the feasts and memorials of the saints. Lastly, there are prayers writing based on topic, i.e. peace, unity, vocations, and a good harvest.
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II. Liturgy of the Word

1. Readings

   1. **Sunday Readings** - The readings of the Mass are found in the Lectionary. For Sundays, the Lectionary follows a three year cycle. There are three readings and a responsorial psalm. The first reading is taken from the Old Testament, except during the Easter Season when it is taken from the Book of Acts in the New Testament. The first reading is followed by a responsorial psalm, generally taken from the Book of Psalms. Then, there is a second reading taken from one of the New Testament Letters. Then the Gospel reading follows. In Year A (the first year) of the three year cycle the Gospel is generally taken from the Gospel of Matthew. Year B is taken from Mark's Gospel, and year C from Luke's Gospel. John's Gospel is read during the Lent and Easter seasons and at other occasional times throughout the year. While not every passage is read the Gospels are generally read from start to finish. The first reading is picked to correspond to the theme of the Gospel reading. The second reading is generally unrelated to the Gospel reading and is presented as a continuous reading of the New Testament Letters.

2. **Daily Readings** - For daily Mass, the Lectionary follows a two year cycle. Actually, the Gospel readings repeat every year of the daily cycle. The first reading, except during Advent, Lent, and Easter, rotate between the two years. The first reading may be taken from the Old or New Testament. The responsorial psalm also follows the same two year rotation as the first reading. Normally, there is no second reading at daily Mass.

2. **Homily** - The homily is done by the priest or deacon. Most generally, the theme of the homily is taken from the readings of the day but may also be taken from any of the prayers of the day or the Eucharistic Prayer. The purpose of the homily is to take the sacred words of scripture or the sacred texts of Mass and interpret them to show how they might guide us in our world today.

3. **Creed (Profession of Faith)** - A creed is a statement or profession of faith. At Mass, the creed we profess is the Nicene Creed which has been in its present form since the fifth century and portions are older than that. The Creed was developed as an expression of the basic beliefs of the Catholic Church in an era where these teachings on such things as the humanity and divinity of Jesus were in question. Today, over 1,600 years later, the Creed is still a fundamental expression of what it means to be Christian. The Creed is to be said on all Sundays and Holy Days.

4. **Prayers of the Faithful** - Jesus says where two or three pray in his name, the prayers will be answered (Matthew 18:19). Before concluding the Liturgy of the Word, we pray together for the needs of the church and for the needs of all God's people.

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III. Liturgy of the Eucharist

1. Preparation of the Gifts - The gifts are now brought forth but it is not just the gifts of bread and wine that we offer. Yes, bread and wine are brought forth but we offer more than that. Visibly, the collection is taken up as one way that we give thanks to God for what he has done for us and contribute to the work of the church. But the gifts we offer go beyond that. We are also called, as members of the body of Christ through our baptism, to offer to use the gifts God has given us for the good of all God's people. The preparation of the gifts concludes with the Prayer over the gifts said by the priest.

2. Eucharistic Prayer - The Eucharistic Prayer begins with the Preface and "The Lord be with you" to which the people respond "And also with you." Throughout the Eucharistic Prayer the priest says the vast majority of the prayer himself with a few responses by the people. We are all called to share in the offering of our sacrifices. The priest as the presider says the prayers on behalf of all the people. However, as we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer that the Spirit come upon the gifts of bread and wine we also pray that the Spirit come upon us and transform form us into "one body, one spirit in Christ." As active participants in the Mass, we listen and offer ourselves as the priest leads us in the Eucharistic Prayer.

3. The Lord's Prayer - As we prepare to receive Communion, we pray together as Jesus taught us for the Lord to give us our daily bread. We ask for forgiveness and that we always do God's will.

4. The Sign of Peace - We seek the peace of Christ. In seeking God's peace we also seek unity with one another. As a sign of peace and unity we offer each other a sign of peace.

5. The Fraction - The fraction rite is the breaking of the bread that has become the Body of Christ. In offering his life for us on the Cross, Jesus has become the Lamb of God that is offered for our sins. As the priest breaks the bread, the people sing the Lamb of God, acknowledging Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that takes away our sins.

6. Communion - In receiving Communion, we profess faith in Jesus. By coming forth to receive Communion, we are agreeing to strive to do God's will in all things. If we don't agree to strive to do God's will, then Communion is not something we seek.

7. Prayer after Communion - We end the Communion Rite with a prayer that we be strengthened and transformed by the Communion we have received.

IV. Concluding Rites - The concluding rites include the final blessing, the dismissal (The Mass is ended, go in peace), the kissing of the altar by the priest and deacon and the recessional. We go out into the world to love and serve the Lord.