

## 5. THE MASS



**Attending a Catholic Mass can be strange and even alienating for those who are unfamiliar with the ceremony. These notes are offered to assist those who are not Catholics to understand what is taking place so that they may participate to the fullest possible extent.**

### Liturgy: the spiritual work of God's people

The Mass is part of the Church's liturgy. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, which means "public work" or "public duty". The liturgy of the Church is its public communal prayer and is a means for the building up of the community.

The Mass, then, is a community event. We don't just "go to" Mass or "attend" Mass as individuals. We come together to celebrate our fellowship in Christ. We worship with one voice and mind. The Mass is the celebration and the strengthening of the community.

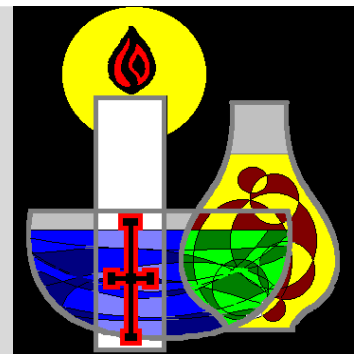
The prescribed text of the Mass – the priest's words and the people's responses – creates a dialogue which allows us all to participate together.

The liturgy is our sacred encounter with God. It invites us to be with God. The rite does not depend on the personality of the priest. The priest is not looking to entertain us. God is the host; it is God who is acting. Through what happens in the liturgy, God transforms us and the world.

School liturgies should direct children's minds to God. As the liturgy draws them closer to God, children must have a sense that much more is taking place than a mere recreational activity:

### Symbolism

Symbols point to truths beyond themselves. The Mass is full of symbolism – water, candles and incense, for example. There are gestures and postures such as standing and kneeling. We sometimes have an entrance procession or a procession to bring up the offertory gifts. Processions symbolise our pilgrim journey as people of faith.



### Silence

Silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying vocally, to the God who comes to meet us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence.

We will have achieved a great deal if at our school Masses we can get children to be truly silent without any distraction or awkwardness. We can train children to achieve this inner stillness wherein they can be receptive to God.



## Origins of the Mass

The Mass has its origins in the Last Supper which Jesus shared with his apostles. The Last Supper itself was derived from the Jewish Passover meal. Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it and said: “Take and eat. This is my body that will be given up for you.” He took a cup filled with wine and said, “Take and drink ... This is my blood ... It will be shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins.”

Gradually the successors of the apostles developed this meal into the form that endures to the present time. The Mass as we know it today includes prayers of thanksgiving, praise and intercession, readings from Scripture, an instruction, and the Eucharistic meal.

It was as early as the second century that the service took the form we use today. This is a service in Rome as described by the church father Justin Martyr:

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the presider verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given.”

## Ancient and sacred tradition

At Mass, then, we are following ancient rites that have been handed on to us. This has implications: we cannot just do what we like with the Mass in the name of “creativity” or “democracy”. Even the Pope can only be a humble servant of the integrity of the liturgy. He too is subject to the Church’s sacred tradition.

## Two mountaintops

The Mass has two main parts, the Liturgy of the Word, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Sometimes these are compared to two mountaintops where we meet God. On the first we hear his Word; on the second we receive him in communion.

We reach mountaintops after a tough climb, and rest and recover while we enjoy the spectacular views. The air is crisp and refreshing. We feel exhilarated. We are open and receptive. From a lofty vantage point, we look back at where we have come from and look ahead to where we are going. Such an experience is an “epiphany”, a time when things fall into place, a time of spiritual significance.

Significant moments in the Bible, when there was a showing forth of the divine (an “epiphany”), took place on mountaintops: Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah on Mount Horeb. God was thought of as dwelling in the heavens, so a mountaintop was a place to be close to God. Jesus would sometimes withdraw from the crowds and go up into a mountain alone to pray. His transfiguration took place on a mountain. The Sermon on the Mount was given on a mountaintop.





# The Mass

## INTRODUCTORY RITES

When the priest enters, he kisses the altar. The altar symbolically represents our Lord. Moreover, traditionally relics of the saints are placed in the altar, which themselves make the altar worthy of such veneration.

### Greeting

We come as a community to join ourselves with Christ. By the priest's greeting and the people's response, we are gathered together.

## Penitential Rite

To be in the proper condition for the celebration of the Mass, we reflect on our sins and pray for God's mercy. We admit our failures and the impact of our actions on others. We ask the faithful already in heaven and our brothers and sisters around us to pray for us.



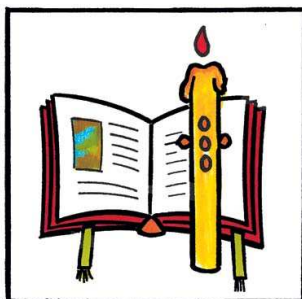
## Gloria

The *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* is an ancient hymn of praise. It begins with the words sung by the angels at Christ's birth (Luke 2:14). The hymn is addressed to each Person of the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Spirit - in turn.

At school masses on weekdays, the Gloria may be omitted.

## Opening Prayer

Next the priest invites the people to pray. During a brief silence we gather our intentions for this celebration and place them before the Lord. The Opening Prayer usually reflects the scripture readings for the day or contains a reference to the event whose memory we celebrate. The Opening Prayer is also sometimes called the "Collect" because it "collects" and unites the supplications of the gathered assembly.



## THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Through these preparations and the opening rites we should now be receptive to hearing the Word of God.

The First Reading is usually from the Old Testament.

Attached to the First Reading is a Psalm, which by definition should be sung. Usually a lector or cantor will recite or sing a verse, to which the People will respond with an antiphon from the Psalm.

The second reading is usually from the New Testament Letters. At weekday Masses, there is usually no second reading.

The readers come from amongst the congregation. This is as it should be as our baptism calls every one to ministry of some kind.



The final reading and high point of the Liturgy of the Word is the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Gospel is greeted with its own special song, the Gospel Acclamation, typically an Alleluia with a verse of Scripture. We stand to welcome the Gospel, and with the thumb of the right hand we trace a small cross on our foreheads, lips and hearts while praying that when we hear the Gospel we will understand it with our minds, speak it with our lips and believe it in our hearts.

At the conclusion of the Gospel, we sit to listen to the Homily, where the priest “breaks open” the various readings and considers their application to our lives.

The Creed and Prayer of the Faithful are attached to the Liturgy of the Word as our response of faith and prayer. That prayer is our solemn work as the Church, praying for the whole world.



## The Creed

We stand to recite the Creed (usually omitted at weekday Masses). The Creed is an ancient profession of the Christian faith.

## Prayer of the Faithful

We place the needs of the world before our Father in Heaven. We usually pray for the Pope and the Church, our country and its leaders, for those in difficulties, for the sick and infirm, and for our families and ourselves.

After each prayer intention, we respond with, “Lord graciously hear us”.



## THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

### The presentation and preparation of the gifts

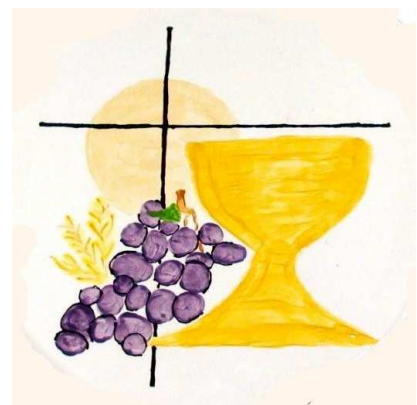
God has blessed us with the gift of creation. Everything we have is from God. He is the “giver of the gifts.” The procession of the gifts at Mass declares, in essence, “Behold the gifts God has given us!” We celebrate God’s bounteousness in nature.

We offer ourselves - all that we are and have done, the work of our entire lives - to God. Bread and wine are the symbols of this offering. In the time of Jesus the work of many families, even of whole communities, was that of cultivating wheat and grapes. Their whole lives became caught up in the process: their hopes, their associations with one another, their intentions, all entered into the history of their produce. The finished bread and wine were an expression of their lives.

Today, although most of us do not produce the bread and wine that is offered at the altar, the bread and wine are symbolic expressions of our giving back to God. He receives us through the bread and wine. These are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, and we receive them back in communion as God’s gift of himself to us. We thereby share in the divine life of God. In this “great exchange” what is God’s became ours, and what is ours becomes God’s.

*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,  
for we have received from your abundance the bread we offer  
you,  
fruit of the earth and work of human hands:  
it will become for us the bread of life.*

*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,  
for we have received from your abundance the wine we offer you,  
fruit of the vine and work of human hands:  
it will become for us the spiritual drink.*



As the priest prepares the bread and wine, he mingles a drop of water with the wine, and prays that as Christ shared our humanity we may share his divinity.



## The Eucharistic Prayer

The priest exhorts us: “Lift up your hearts,” and we respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.” The priest then continues with the Eucharistic Prayer preface, which leads to the *Sanctus* acclamation (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), the words of which come from Isaiah and the Gospels (the cry of the people when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey).

The priest then begins the Eucharistic Prayer. The word *eucharist* means “thanksgiving”. We give thanks for everything that God has done for us in Jesus Christ through his life, his teaching, his suffering, death and resurrection. The priest prays that by the power of the Holy Spirit the gifts of bread and wine may become Christ’s body and blood. This is the moment of

consecration. The priest holds up first the consecrated bread and then the consecrated wine so all can see. Bells are rung during this “elevation” to call our attention to what Catholics believe is Our Lord’s Real Presence. The bells come from a time where there were no sound systems and some of the congregation could not hear the words of consecration. Once the bells had rung, everyone knew that the consecration had taken place.

The Eucharistic Prayer also includes prayer for the Church, the Pope, the local bishop, all priests, all the Faithful, and the Faithful Departed.

It is important to remember that it is into the *risen* Christ’s divine Body and Blood that the bread and wine are changed. We are not eating and drinking the human Jesus’ Body and Blood in communion. We do not need to be too concerned about *how* our gifts become the Body and Blood of Christ; this is something we accept in faith. As with many things in our faith, it is a *mystery*. Calling something a mystery does not mean that we cannot know anything about it, but that we cannot know everything about it, because the mystery is inexhaustible.

## Communion rite

We begin the Communion liturgy by saying or singing together the Our Father, where we speak to God as our Father, where we ask him for our daily bread, and where we ask for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. Sometimes we join hands to underline that this is our shared experience.

The “Body of Christ” also means all of Christ’s followers united in Christian communities all over the world. Jesus is the head of the Body and we, each with our unique and diverse gifts and talents, are its members. So, before we receive Holy Communion we need to be in harmony with our brothers and sisters. In the greeting of peace we exchange a gesture of friendship and reconciliation, usually a handshake or a hug, with all those around us before we approach the table of unity and togetherness. We remember the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go at once to make peace with your brother; then come back and offer your gift to God” (Matthew 5:23-24). (The exchange of the Sign of Peace sometimes takes place not at this point in the Mass but after the Penitential Rite or after the Prayer of the Faithful.)



## Receiving communion

We do not receive Communion lightly. We are not engaging purely in a private and individual communion. Participation in the Body of Christ presupposes total openness to the reign of God, to the reign of justice and peace, to acceptance of the daily effort for justice in love. When we receive Communion we renew our commitment to assimilating totally into our very being all that Jesus teaches, his vision, his values, his understanding of the meaning and purpose of life.

Receiving communion is an intimation of the divine. We are to be able to say, with Paul, “I live, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20), and, “Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). A pledge of future glory is given to us: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). The Eucharist activates hope in the present time for the consummation of God’s purposes for all humanity and for the fulfilment of God’s reign of justice, freedom and peace throughout creation.

The time of prayer after communion is a time for reflection, so we should not distract one another from enjoying it.



## Concluding rite

After the Prayer after Communion, the Priest blesses the people and “dismisses” (the origin of the word *Mass*) them: “The Mass is ended. Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord.” He sends us out into the World to take Christ with us in our hearts and make Him known to whoever we meet.

## A Prayer before Mass

*Almighty and ever-living God,*

*I come to this Mass with the community of my brothers and sisters to be nourished by your Word and by your Body and Blood, as food on our earthly pilgrimage.*

*Thank you for the joy of gathering together to worship You and to celebrate our unity in You.*

*We bring you our difficulties and struggles, our joys and hopes, for sanctification. As we offer you our lives, heal our infirmities, wash away our sinfulness, and enlighten our blindness.*

*Help us at this Mass to be present to you as you are present to us, so that, in your infinite goodness, we may become that which we are seeking to be.*

*As we listen your Word, help us not just to believe the story but to enter into it and live it.*

*When we receive the Sacrament of your Body and Blood with reverence and humility, may we receive also the grace and power of the Sacrament.*

*As you nourish us and we share the communion of your divine life, help us to reflect on our responsibilities towards a world without sufficient nourishment, a world in which injustice, poverty, and oppression are ever-present. Help us to re-commit ourselves to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel, so that all may share in the joy and consolation of knowing You.*

*Amen.*

This pamphlet is part of a series on aspects of Catholic education for teachers, parents and board members, produced by the Ethos Committee of the Catholic Schools Board of the Archdioceses of Pretoria and Johannesburg