

The Mass in Slow Motion: How to Pray the Order of the Mass

By Father Raphael Assamah, St. Theresa Catholic Church, Des Moines

Adapted for the particular celebration by

Father PJ McManus, Christ the King Catholic Church

Before the liturgy begins:

The Mass is the most important prayer we pray as Catholics. Tonight's Mass is designed to help all of us pray it better. The Mass is the Source and Summit of our Catholic Faith. It's the source of life and grace for us; it is where Christ dwells to fulfill us who are hungry and thirsty for life everlasting. It's also the summit because it is the greatest gift that God has given us—the life of His own Son to forgive us our sins.

During Mass, time and space are changed, bread and wine are changed, and every part of our lives are changed. All the centuries between this moment and The Last Supper disappear. All the miles between us and Jerusalem disappear. We are there and there is here. And for the next hour or so, all the time between now and when we meet Jesus in heaven—that time disappears too.

Vesting and Preparation

You've probably noticed that the priest and other assisting ministers wear special clothes when performing their duties at Mass. Normally this all happens in a room nearby called a "sacristy". This is essentially the priest's dressing room. It's a place to prepare things practically for the celebration of the Mass, but even more, for the priest and other ministers to prepare themselves for what they have to do. On special occasions the vesting takes place in public, and we're going to do that tonight so that Father's preparation can help us better prepare for what we've come here to do.

The vestments which the priest and other ministers wear are drawn from both the style of clothing common in the ancient Roman Empire, as well as from the vestments of the priests in the Jerusalem temple.

Because each item has a different meaning, the priest says a little prayer as he puts each one on.

First, he washes his hands:

[insert prayer by the priest]

Next, he puts on the amice. This is a kind of removable collar intended to protect the rest of the vestments from any sweat. [insert prayer by priest]

Over this he puts the alb. The alb is the garment common to the baptized. Babies are clothed in white at their baptism, as are adults. Today's white wedding dresses are a memory of the white garment proper to every Christian. [insert prayer by priest]

The cincture is a kind of belt, usually rope or fabric, which is worn around the waist. It reminds us to keep focused and avoid distractions. [insert prayer by priest]

The stole is the garment proper to the ordained. The word "stole" comes from *stola*, which was a special scarf worn by Roman senators. But the vestment is drawn from a similar garment worn by the Jewish priests, which always have tassels. This is why traditional stoles always have tassels at the bottom. Deacons wear their stoles diagonally; priests wear theirs hanging down or crossed over the breast; bishops always have theirs hanging down flat. [insert prayer by priest]

Next comes one of two garments, either the chasuble or the cope. The chasuble is the vestment proper to sacrifice, and so it's only worn in the sanctuary or on the way to it. At times a priest will even take it on or off to mark how close the action he's performing is to the sacrifice of the Mass. The cope is a kind of special cape or coat for church. It's worn for processions, especially when they have to go outside. Tonight the priest will start with a cope, but change into the chasuble once the Mass begins.

[insert prayer by priest]

Obviously we don't all have special vestments to wear to Mass, but we should be just as intentional as the priest is in getting himself ready. Do I have "Sunday Clothes" that I keep special to show God I'm giving Him my best? And whatever I wear, do I get myself ready for the day when I know I'll be attending Mass later in a way that prepares me for what's to come? Do I fast a little beforehand to "make room" for what God wants to do in me?

Today is a special feast—the Presentation of the Lord. Because of the feast the entrance is a little bit different than usual. This will make more sense as the Mass goes along.

The Blessing of the Candles

Every Mass can change our life. It is really possible that during the Mass, every part of our lives can be changed. All that we do, everything and everyone we care about, everything that gives us joy and everything that makes us suffer—we can put it all on the altar and offer it *and ourselves* to God. And by that offering we are changed—just as the bread and wine are changed, so that we become more closely united to Christ and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit's light and strength.

So let us choose to be present. NOW, in this moment, let us join with one another, priest and people, readers and servers, ushers and musicians and greeters and strangers, along with all the Catholics around the world and all the choirs of angels and saints by picking up our hymnal and singing together our opening hymn. Choose to be present: NOW.

The Entrance and Veneration of the Altar (with incense)

Commentator: (before the Sign of the Cross and Greeting):

As the priest and other ministers approach the sanctuary they bow towards the altar—the chief symbol of Jesus in any church. On special feasts like today the priest might use incense now, first around the

altar, then to the crucifix, then any images that might be in the sanctuary. This is because these introductory rites remind us that we are now united with the angels and saints in heaven.

Notice that now the priest changes those vestments, like putting off his coat and putting on his apron.

The priest now signs himself as we sign ourselves with the Sign of the Cross. This gesture is itself a prayer; uniting heaven and earth, past and future, north and south, east and west. He will then greet us with words from scripture. Our response here is special because this greeting is not simply a fancy way of saying, “Good morning.” When the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” or something very like it, our response is, “And with your spirit,” because we want the Spirit given him at ordination to make him ready for what he has to do.

Sign of the Cross, Greeting,

The priest now invites us to call to mind our sins so that we might be made more worthy, more ready, more prepared for what God has called us here to do. He then leads us in a prayer asking for God’s mercy, and then prays for God’s forgiveness for us all. Then, as if we can’t hold it in any longer, we sing the song the angels’ sang the night God was born: Glory to God in the highest!

Penitential Act, Gloria

The priest then invites us to pray and pauses. This silence is when we should bring to mind the reasons we came to Mass. God is here, listening to the prayers and waiting. The priest then sings or says a prayer called a *Collect*, because it *collects* all of the prayers of the people gathered here and those of the whole church into a prayer which focuses our attention for the rest of the Mass.

Collect

The first major portion of the Mass is called The Liturgy of the Word. During this time there are readings from the Bible, taken either to focus our attention on the day’s feast, or as a way of working our way through the Bible together as a community throughout the year.

In addition to the readings which are read aloud, we are invited to respond with verses from one of the psalms. The psalms are ancient Jewish hymns, hymns Jesus would have known and sung Himself. We respond to the reading—which is God’s word, with the psalm, which is also God’s word. God speaks and we respond; the way we respond is God’s work in us.

The initial readings can come from both the Old and the New Testaments, depending on the time of year the particular celebration. But special attention and reverence is given to the gospel reading as this contains the words of the Word—the words of Jesus Himself. For this reason, there is another procession, this time with a special book which only contains the gospel readings. If a deacon is present he asks the priest’s blessing before reading the gospel; if a priest is by himself then he reads the gospel, but says a prayer while bowing low before the altar that he would be purified inside and out. The gospel book is often accompanied by candles, and after the deacon or priest gives the greeting it may be incensed, recognizing anew Christ’s presence among us. As he begins he “picks up” the whole text of the gospel reading with his thumb and prints it on his head, on his lips, and on his heart. We do this too, praying that the Word of God would be on our heads/in our mind; on our lips/in the words we speak; and on our hearts/in the way that we live. Then the words are said or sung. When he is done he kisses the book just as he has the altar and says, “Through the words of the gospel may our sins be wiped away.”

And then we sit and listen as the preacher strives not only to explain the readings, but to connect them with our lives and help us to pray better now, in this Mass.

First Reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading, Gospel, Homily

In the ancient church the catechumens would be dismissed at this point. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was that as they had not yet been baptized they weren’t yet ready to stay for the next part—the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This is why even today they

are dismissed at this point—just before the Creed—because teaching them the Creed is one of the most significant parts of preparation for baptism. Everything that happens from this point forward is really *the work of the baptized*; and, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit.

On Sundays and the biggest feasts, the Creed is now recited. We do this standing, in part, because the Creed is like an oath we swear, and we do so standing out of respect. Just as the responsorial psalm was our collective response to the first word God spoke to us today, so the Creed is our response in faith to the saving words we have heard proclaimed in the gospel and explained in the homily. Partway through the Creed we bow at the words, “and was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” This is in honor of the Lord’s Incarnation. That said, unless today’s feast falls on a Sunday, there is no creed.

Whether the creed is recited or not, we now stand for the Prayers of the Faithful. This too is a response in faith to what we have heard proclaimed in our midst, but it is also the work for which we were baptized. We now stand to make intercession for all those who stand in need, especially the church, civil authorities, those experiencing any difficulty, and for our local community. If a deacon is present he leads the Prayers of the Faithful because the deacon’s role is to be a kind of bridge between the people and the priest. Just as during the collect we were encouraged to consider why we have come to Mass personally today, so the Prayers of the Faithful remind us that whatever our own reasons, we’re here together as a body, and that body has needs often beyond what we can see all by ourselves. Sometimes picking one of the intercessions from the Prayers of the Faithful and making that your intention for the rest of the Mass can help us to focus.

The Prayers of the Faithful

Now is the time for us to prepare to offer our lives and our work to God. When we have a collection, our money is a symbol of what we do for a living. We give our money to God as a sign of our gratitude to him for

everything he has given us. We give our money to help continue the work of building God's kingdom here on earth.

We also offer food and drink—simple, unleavened bread, a sign of all our sufferings; and wine, a sign of all our joys. Bread and wine are the very gifts Jesus took into his own hands on the night before he died. When the Holy Spirit makes them Jesus' body and blood during the Eucharistic Prayer, this food and drink has the ability to transform us and make us one—one with God and one with each other—the prayer of Jesus Himself at the Last Supper.

Several subtle things happen during the offertory which are easily missed. First, the priest pours a bit of water into the wine while saying a prayer. This is a memory of when wine was made stronger and needed to be diluted, but the prayer is very ancient and comes to us from Christmastime: "May we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

After he has offered the wine he bows low before the altar and says a prayer quietly that comes from the three young men thrown into the fiery furnace in the Book of the Prophet Daniel: *With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.*" This is because the Church really does understand what we do here as a share in Christ's own sacrifice.

On major feasts the priests may now use incense again. This time the incense is used primarily as an offering, and what is incensed is that is about to be offered: the gifts on the altar, the priest, and the people—along with the image of Christ crucified, with Whom we are united in offering this one, perfect sacrifice.

Finally, he washes his hands. Once upon a time this washing was practical; people would offer chickens and small animals for food along with bread and wine. But we kept the gesture, even after it stopped being practical, because it is still necessary to make sure that we're pure both inside and out in order to do this most important thing together that we're ever going to do.

Finally, the priest will give a command. Notice here that the invitation is gone. It's not, "Let us pray," but simply: **Pray!** The priest is now like a general ordering his troops out to battle, or a symphony conductor having lifted her baton and cued her musicians up to play. What are we praying for? That the Lord *would accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and the glory of His name, for our good and for all His holy Church.* The priest then prays on our behalf that the gifts would be accepted and we would be transformed.

Preparation of the Altar and Gifts, Prayer Over the Offerings

The priest will now greet us as he has several times before, and we respond in kind, praying that the Spirit given him at ordination would make him ready for what he will lead us to do. Then he issues another command: Lift up your hearts! The key to getting more out of Mass is to keep lifting up our hearts during the whole of the Eucharistic Prayer. And once our hearts are lifted up, what are we called to do? Give thanks, because the word Eucharist means "thanksgiving".

The priest then sings or says a preface, which brings together all that has been happening in the Mass so far and focuses our attention on what's about to happen on the altar. And in response we sing another song that we learned from the angels. Just as at the beginning of Mass we sing the song the angels sang on the night Jesus was born—when God came in the flesh to earth; so now we sing the song the angels sing in heaven—a song we learn from the prophet Isaiah—because we have been brought in the flesh into court of God in heaven.

And so we drop to our knees, just as the magi did once they realized who the Child was, just as Simeon and Anna did in that temple so long ago, just as St. Paul commanded us. Because Jesus is coming.

Now comes the true high point of the Mass—the Eucharistic Prayer. During this prayer, time and distance drop out and the Upper Room where the disciples gathered for the Last Supper, the cross on which Jesus died, and the empty tomb after the Resurrection are all made present to us at once—and we are made present to them.

The priest will then offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Christ, and then he will ask God to send the Holy Spirit upon the gifts to change them, so that they might become the Body and Blood of Christ. Then he will recite the words of the Lord at the Last Supper. These words are so sacred, so important, that at times they have only been said in the quietest voice, and at other times they have been accompanied by bells and gongs. By these words the gifts are transformed, and so the priest immediately shows the now-changed gifts to the people and genuflects in adoration. Rising he cries, “The Mystery of Faith” and we respond with words, not addressed to God the Father in heaven, but to Jesus Himself, now present on the altar.

Having recognized Christ’s Presence in this new and radical way, the priest now asks God to send the Holy Spirit again, this time to do something much harder; that is, to transform us into one body, one spirit in Christ. By receiving the gifts that have been transformed, He means to transform us. Then we pray for the particular ways we mean to do that: by keeping communion with the Church (especially the pope and our bishop), by working to make the world a more just and peaceful place, by interceding for those in need, and remembering our beloved dead and relying on the help of the saints.

The priest then concludes with a Great Doxology which summarizes all that has been said: Through Him (that is, Jesus), with Him (Jesus), in Him (Jesus), O God almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, now and forever.” And we respond “Amen.” Because this concludes the most important prayer of the Mass it is most often sung, and the “Amen” is often repeated several times. It affirms our share, our stake, our participation in the greatest thing God has ever done—present now in our midst.

The priest then leads us in praying the Lord’s Prayer. We probably say this prayer every day, maybe even several times a day, but when we do it here it’s different. First, we do so in the Presence of the Lord who taught it to us. Second, we do so precisely with Him as members of His Body. The “Daily Bread” of the Eucharist is pulsing right here in our

midst. And finally we do so in preparation for Holy Communion, longing to be one even as God is one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

After the Lord's Prayer the priest turns to address the Lord on the altar again. "Lord Jesus Christ," he says. "You said to your apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you." He then prays for the peace and unity of the Church. We all exchange the peace with the priest in much the same way we exchange the ordinary greeting. Then we exchange the peace with each other, not so much as a sign of fellowship but as a recognition of the Presence of the Eucharistic Lord. Just as He once appeared in the Upper Room and said to his disciples "Peace be with you," so now He appears to us and says the same. The exchange of peace is meant to be sober and short because it is most definitely not about us, but about Him and His presence among us.

Eucharistic Prayer, Lord's Prayer, Sign of Peace, Lamb of God

We have just sung one of the most ancient hymns of the church, calling on Jesus with the words of John the Baptist, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" During this time the priest breaks the bread, a sign that though many individuals we are made one in Christ. He also takes a small fragment of the consecrated host and places it into the chalice. Just as Jesus' Body and Blood were divided in His death on the cross, so now they are reunited on the altar. The Christ we receive is not dead, but living. The priest then says a prayer to prepare himself for Holy Communion. We should do the same. Then, together, we can respond to the priest's invitation to Holy Communion with the words of the faithful centurion, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

In the Liturgy of the Word, God promised to be present to us. In Holy Communion, God delivers on that promise to us, and in so doing prepares us to bring His presence to others as well. How could we help but respond in song?

Holy Communion

After Holy Communion has been distributed to all the faithful, the remnants are collected and reverently placed into the tabernacle, a special place for prayer and adoration of our Eucharistic Lord. The vessels which have been used for Holy Communion are carefully cleansed and the priest or deacon who does so has another prayer we very seldom hear: *What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart; that what is given us in time might be our healing for eternity. Amen.*”

During this time after Communion the priest will lead us again into the silence. We should use this time to reach out to be in communion with Jesus and with everyone He will lead us to encounter. Jesus is in you now: really, truly, entirely. What do you have to say to Him? What does He have to say to you?

The Mass sends us out on mission to bring Christ to the whole world. Is Jesus calling you to serve Him in a special way by reaching out in active, loving service to any particular person or group? Is Jesus inviting you to think about a vocation? Is He leading you to someone whom you might have hurt, or who might have hurt you? Is He leading you to love someone you might overlook, or to let someone unexpected love you?

We are now as close as we can be to the saints and all those in heaven. Is there someone that you’ve lost that you need to speak to? Do you need to tell anyone that you still love them? Is there someone you need to apologize to? Is there someone you need to pray for? *Listen* to Jesus. Let Him comfort you in your hurts and in your suffering. Let Him reveal Himself to you. Let Jesus give you strength for all the work that you will do for him. Hear him answer the prayers in your heart.

Prayer after Communion

We have concluded our celebration of Holy Communion with a prayer that directs our attention outwards—so that the graces we have received in this Mass can bear fruit in the world.

Everything else that happens is deliberately spare and simple. There may be some announcements, but they should be brief if necessary.

Then the priest simply blesses us and the priest or deacon dismisses us. These prayers may be longer or shorter, sung or spoken, depending on the day. But in each and every case we should imagine Jesus Himself laying His own hands on our head and breathing the Holy Spirit into us to strengthen us for the work He is sending us out to do.

That is, after all, what the word “Mass” means: *missa*, as in *mission*.
You. Are. Sent.

Thanks be to God.

Concluding Rites