



Exploring the Mass: A Step-By-Step Explanation

The Mass is the public ritual Catholics celebrate in response to Jesus' command to "do this in memory of me." One of the distinctive marks of ritual prayer is that Catholics know what is going to happen next. We do things over and over. Our daily lives have their rituals also. There are set ways of greeting people, eating, responding to a text. In addition, when we are accustomed to a certain way of doing things, we seldom ask why we do it that way.

What is the Mass? The Mass [also called the celebration of the Eucharist] is our opportunity as Catholic people to praise and thank God for the gift of our salvation in Christ Jesus. The Mass is one way in which we share in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. It is celebrated with a priest [or bishop] who leads the prayer in communion with the worshipping Assembly. While each have different roles, they share in a common act of worship called Liturgy, the public prayer of the Church. The Mass is public prayer, the liturgy of the Church.

The Mass is composed of two Principal parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Mass begins with Introductory Rites and ends with Concluding Rites. Another way of dividing a Mass is into its "ordinary parts"—i.e., those texts which, with some variations, are parts of the Mass on a daily basis; and the mass's "proper parts"—i.e., the text of prayers and selections of Scripture readings proper or appropriate to the specific feasts being observed. "Proper" refers to parts of a church service, like prayers, readings, or songs that change depending on the specific day or season.

The shape of the Mass is as a meal and a sacrifice. When friends gather for a meal they sit and talk. Then, they will move to the table, offer grace, pass the food, eat and drink, and finally take their leave and go home. As we examine the Mass and its parts, we will discover ritual acts of Gathering, Storytelling, Meal Sharing and Commissioning.

Catholics celebrate Mass every Sunday as well as each day of the year, except for Good Friday. While both Sunday and daily Mass are similar in content and shape daily Mass is usually less musical; has three Scripture readings while Sunday has four; and would not usually pray the Glory to God or the Creed. If a special liturgical day occurs on a weekday of the liturgical year calendar, the Glory to God and Creed would be included at the mass on that particular day.

Let's examine what a typical daily Mass includes:

GATHERING: [Part One The Introductory Rites]

Coming together and forming the Church is at the heart of our worship at Mass. The main reason behind each of the ritual actions of the first part of Mass can be described in this word: GATHERING. The purpose of the Introductory Rites is to bring us together into one, ready to listen to God's Word, and break bread together. God is the one who has summoned us to this celebration of the Eucharist. We do not volunteer.

Genuflection: In medieval Europe, it was a custom to go down on one knee [to genuflect] before a king or person of rank. This practice gradually became a practice of the Church and people genuflected in the presence of Christ in the tabernacle before entering the pew. If the tabernacle is not located in the sanctuary, it is proper for members of the assembly to express their reverence for the altar by bowing to the altar before entering the pew.

Posture: When Mass begins, everyone stands up. Standing is the posture of a Christian at prayer expressing attentiveness to the Word of God and willingness to carry it out. During this time, the priest and his assistants enter from within the Assembly into the Sanctuary, venerate the altar by kissing it, and going to his Chair, or place from which he leads the prayer for all. Many times, the Assembly also can begin by singing together which unites our voices in a common word.

Greeting: We begin with the sign of the cross, remembering our baptism. This is done by touching one's forehead, heart and shoulders while saying "*In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" The priest greets everyone with "*The Lord be with you*" These opening words reminds us "*where two or three are gathered in his name, Christ is present.*" (Matthew 18:20) The ritual dialogue is always completed with the formula "*And with your spirit,*" acknowledging the priest having received the Spirit of God through his ordination.

Penitential Act: This rite invites us to remember our sin as well as the one sent to save us from the power of sin and death, Jesus Christ. This Act can use a number of different formulae. If a deacon is present, he usually will lead this part.

Glory to God: This hymn is a declaration of praise of the Holy Trinity and can be said or sung. It is not usually prayed at a weekday Mass, outside of the Easter season.

Opening Prayer: Closing this first part of Mass, the priest will ask us to join our minds in prayer with the words "*Let us pray.*" While the priest pauses, the Assembly offers their intentions. The priest "collects" these intentions into one prayer, to which all respond "*Amen.*"

TELLING THE STORY: [Part Two- The Liturgy of the Word]

Gathering with friends for a meal, we most often begin with conversation, sharing our lives. At Mass, following the Gathering Rites, we sit and listen to the Word of God proclaimed. These are the stories of God's people.

Two Readings and a Psalm: On a weekday most often there are two readings from the Bible. The first reading is from the Old Testament [except during the Easter season]. We remember the origin of the covenant God made with his chosen people. This first reading points to the Gospel, giving background and insight into the meaning of what Jesus will do in the Gospel. Between the first reading and Gospel, we sing or recite a psalm, a song from the Bible's hymnal, the Book of Psalms.

Standing for the Gospel: We stand in attentive reverence because of the unique presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel. After greeting us with "*The Lord be with you,*" the priest introduces the Gospel reading by marking a small cross on his forehead, lips and heart, praying silently that God will open his mind and heart so that his lips may worthily proclaim the Gospel. We do the same. The Gospel readings ends with our response to "*The Gospel of the Lord,*" by saying together "*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Homily: The weekday homily is brief, given by a priest, and is an act of worship rooted in the Scripture readings we have just heard.

Universal Prayers: We stand and offer prayers for the needs and salvation of all the world, praying for the Church, nations and their leaders, people in special need and the local needs of our community.

MEAL SHARING: [Part Three- The Liturgy of the Eucharist]

Following the readings, we move to the Altar Table for the sacred meal of sacrifice, sharing and thanksgiving. Much like a meal at the home of a friend when we set the table, say grace, and share the food by eating and drinking, so too at Mass, these ritual actions are called 1) the Preparation of the Altar and Gifts, 2) the Eucharistic Prayer, 3) the Communion Rite.

Preparation of the Altar and Gifts: The early Christians brought bread and wine from their homes to the Church to be used for Mass and the poor. Today the priest receives bread and wine brought forward by members of the Assembly. The priest then mixes water with wine and washes his hands. He then invites us to pray that the sacrifice to be made will be acceptable to God. The Assembly responds "*Amen*" to the Prayer Over the Gifts.

Office of Worship, July 2026



The Eucharistic Prayer: The prayer that follows brings us to the heart of faith. The words of the Eucharistic Prayer vary from day to day, but has this consistent structure: 1) We call upon God to remember the wonderful saving deeds of our history 2) We recall the central event in our history, Jesus Christ, and in particular the memorial He left us on night before he died. We recall his Passion, Death and Resurrection. 3) After gratefully calling to mind all the wonderful saving acts God has done for us in the past, we ask God to continue those deeds of Christ in the present age: We pray that we may become one Body, one Spirit in Christ.

Invitation: The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a dialogue between the priest and the Assembly. He greets us with "*The Lord be with you.*" He then asks if we are ready and willing to come to the Table to renew our baptismal commitment, offering ourselves to God: "*Lift up your hearts.*" We respond with "*We lift them up to the Lord.*" We are invited to give thanks to the Lord God, to which we respond, "*It is right and just.*"

[Giving Thanks is the Greek word for Eucharist.]

Institution Narrative:

Consecration- As the priest continues the prayer; he gives thanks and praise, calling upon the Holy Spirit to change our gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. He recalls the events of the Last Supper- the institution of the Eucharist. Within this moment in the prayer, we proclaim the Mystery of Faith, citing the deeds of our salvation: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ.

Prayer for unity and intercessions:

Remembering our salvation in Christ, we make our main petition at every Eucharist: we pray for unity. We add prayers for the bishop of Rome, our Pope, for the bishop of our local Church; for the living and the dead, as well as ourselves, that through the intercession of the saints we may one day be at the Table in heaven. We look forward to that day, and raise our voices with all the saints who have gone before us as the priest holds up the consecrated bread and wine and offers a prayer of Glory to God in the name of Christ "*Through him, and with him and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever.*" We give our Amen to this prayer, which expresses our assent and participation in the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

The Communion Rite - Our Father and the Sign of Peace:

We prepare to eat and drink at the Table of the Lord, praying the prayer our Savior gave us... Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive.... Communion is the source of our reconciliation. Thus, we make a gesture of union and forgiveness with those around us and offer a Sign of Peace.

Invitation to Communion: The priest shows the Body and Blood of Christ and invites us to come to the altar table echoing the words of John the Baptist "*Behold the Lamb of God*" to which we respond, "*Lord, I am not worthy...*" [Matthew 8:8] Members of the Assembly who are receiving Communion approach the altar in procession.

Communion: Just as God fed our ancestors in the desert on their journey, so God gives us food for our journey. Those receiving Communion approach the priest or minister who gives the Eucharist with the words "The Body of Christ" or "The Blood of Christ," and to which the communicant responds "Amen." After the Communion Procession, all pray silently in their hearts, thanking and praising God. The priest unites our prayers in the Prayer after Communion.

BEING SENT: [Part four- The Concluding Rites]

The Word and Eucharist strengthen us together with this Assembly to go in hope.

Blessing and Dismissal: As we receive a blessing, we bow our heads. The priest names the Trinity- Father, Son and Holy Spirit- as we make the Sign of the Cross. The priest or deacon sends us forth "*Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord*" to which we give our assent by saying "*Thanks be to God.*"

To Live a Eucharistic Life: We leave the Assembly and the church building carrying Christ with us. What happens in our lives during the week ahead gives deeper meaning to the ritual actions we have just celebrated at Mass, whether its family or work. It is only in relation to our daily lives that the full meaning of the ritual actions of Mass becomes clear to us. We are to live a Eucharistic life for the world.