

A Map of the Mass

A Guide to Understanding the Catholic Mass



Map of the Mass: Introductory Rites

A Thought Experiment: Imagine someone you love more than anyone else in the world: someone you love to talk to, love to just be quiet with; someone who totally understands you, totally loves you back. Now imagine that, for some reason, you only get to visit with that person for one hour a week—and you can only touch them once during the visit. Imagine how much you would value your time together, how eagerly you would listen to what they had to say, how joyfully you would respond to it—and how much you would look forward to that moment when you could touch them.

That person is God. That visit is the Mass. And that moment you can touch Him is Communion.

This series hopes to deepen your understanding of the Mass: the genius of its structure; the richness of its mystery; the perfection of its prayer. Though its current structure is recognizable even its earliest descriptions (e.g., St. Justin Martyr in the 2nd century) it has evolved into a four-part prayer in which each part points to our singular encounter with Christ in the Eucharist. This week we'll be looking at **The Introductory Rites**, consisting of five events or moments, which, since the structure of the Mass has a distinctly musical quality to it, could even be thought of as “movements”...

The Entrance – This is the procession from the back of the church to the foot of the altar. It's also when we sing the opening hymn. *A Note on Singing:* Psalm 100 says "Make a joyful noise!", not "Everybody should sing perfectly." *Another Thought Experiment:* Even though God is perfect, imagine He's a little hard of hearing. So use the opening hymn to let him know you're here—and you're happy! *Something to Watch For:* After the priest bows before the altar, he goes up and kisses it. The place he kisses is where the bread and wine will become the Body and Blood of Jesus. He's kissing *where the sacrifice will happen*.

The Greeting – After leading us in the Sign of the Cross (i.e., the sign that identifies us as Christians and blesses everything we do together), he says, "The Lord be with you" and we respond "And with your spirit." This exchange happens at four distinct places during the Mass. Watch for where else it shows up. Why do you think we keep saying it? (Not going to tell you—at least not yet.)

The Penitential Act – Before we move into the sacred space of the Eucharist, we acknowledge that we're sinners and ask for God's mercy. First we pray the Confiteor ("I confess to Almighty God...") and then sing the Kyrie ("Lord, have mercy..."). (The Penitential Act may also remind you that you're overdue for Confession.)

The Gloria – Our response to the experience of God's mercy is the Gloria, a song first taught to us (at least the first two lines) by angels: it's what they sang after they told the shepherds that the Christ had been born in Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth!" It's also a glorification of the Triune God, the mystery of which informs the entire Mass and will be referred to throughout its celebration.

The Collect [kol-ekt] – Also known simply as the Opening Prayer, it "collects" or gathers our prayers into a single petition. (If you're offering this Mass for a personal intention, this is a good place to silently mention it to God.) During feasts, solemnities and liturgical seasons such as Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter, the Collect will reflect the themes of the feast or season.



Understanding the Mass

Liturgy of the Word

Map of the Mass: The Liturgy of the Word

The two central components of the Mass are the **Liturgy of the Word** and the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**, which together, the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, “form one single act of worship.” They are both experiences of the living Christ, both encounters with the mystery of God’s love, both expressions of the power of the Spirit. The Liturgy of the Word is so important, so intrinsic to the Mass’s act of worship, and so intimately connected to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, that popular belief claims that if you miss the Gospel, you shouldn’t receive Communion. This isn’t entirely true—and yet it is. On the one hand, canon law says nothing about being at church in time for the Gospel in order to receive Communion. On the other hand, canon law says that the Sunday Obligation means attending a *whole Mass* on Sunday—and a whole Mass means *being there from the very beginning*. So no, you don’t have to be there in time for the Gospel; you have to be there in time for the Entrance (see last week’s Map of the Mass: Introductory Rites).

Maybe think of the Mass as a surprise party. Missing the Liturgy of the Word (or not paying attention to it, which is the same thing) is like skipping the surprise part and just coming for a piece of the cake. And, silly as it may be, the surprise party comparison isn’t entirely off the mark. If you really listen to the Word, really let it sink into you, confuse you, comfort you, call you, challenge you, you’ll be surprised every Sunday of the year. There are countless stories about how a single phrase from the Gospel has changed someone’s life, turned people into saints. You just have to listen. You just have to wait for your phrase...

The First Reading – For most of the year, this reading is taken from the Old Testament, though during the Easter season it will be something from the *Acts of the Apostles* (stories about the early Church). We read the Old Testament every week because as Christians we believe that God works through history, and that the story of salvation began at the very moment when God said, “Let there be light.” So when we read the Old Testament, we are, in a sense, looking through a family album—except that a lot of our family stories go back to the Bronze Age. This can make them seem strange, confusing. But they’re all stories about God trying to get through to us. Sometimes even God seems strange in the Old Testament, but keep in mind the strange things He’s had to do to get through to *you* sometimes. And if you’re

really confused by something, ask the priest about it after Mass. He'll be thrilled to know you were listening that closely.

The Responsorial Psalm – It's called "responsorial" because it's responding to the theme of The First Reading. Sometimes the connection is very clear; sometimes not so much. It doesn't really matter because all the Psalms are wonderful. The Old Testament is made up of a wide range of literary genres—history, legend, prophecy, poetry—and the Psalms are among the best poems ever written. Best because they're heartfelt; best because they're human. (It's estimated that about two-thirds of them are "complaint psalms." Sound familiar?) And they're all love poems, even the complaints; all about how much God loves us, how much we love God; the times when that love is easy; the times it's tough. And musically, it's one of the prettiest parts of the Mass. We only sing the antiphon (the repeated line between the verses). Again: you don't have to be a great singer. You just have to remember you're singing a love song.

The Second Reading – This is usually an excerpt from one of the letters St. Paul wrote to early Christian communities (otherwise an excerpt from another New Testament writer: St. Peter, St. John, St. Jude, etc.). At times St. Paul can be gorgeous and clear ("Love is patient, love is kind..."); at others, you know something great, something profound, is going on but you just can't get a handle on it. Don't feel bad. Even St. Peter said that St. Paul could be hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). Hang in there, and even if you aren't entirely getting the theology, you can at least enjoy Paul's enthusiasm. St. Paul is *passionate*—and especially passionate about Christ. You can always learn something from that. Besides, homilists love to preach about the letters of St. Paul—especially the tough bits—so keep your ears open at the homily (about which more later) and chances are the priest will talk about the part you found confusing.

The Gospel – The high point of the Liturgy of the Word is the reading of the Gospel, and there are several liturgical "gestures" that heighten the importance—and reverence—of the moment. First: we all stand, a universal sign of respect, and sing the **Gospel Acclamation** (a verse from Scripture bracketed by Alleluias) ("Alleluia", by the way, comes from Hebrew and means "Praise the Lord!"). Sometimes the priest holds the Book of the Gospels up for all to see, similar to the Elevation of the Host at the Consecration. The similarity is not accidental. Christ is not only the Bread of Life (John 6:35) but He is also the Word of Life (1 John 1:1). He is as present in the Gospel as He is in the consecrated host. So listen to Him carefully. And don't worry if He says something you don't quite understand—or don't quite feel ready to hear. The Apostles were fairly clueless throughout most of Jesus' ministry. But they never stopped loving Him—and never stopped listening.

The Homily – And if you did find something confusing (maybe even troubling) in the Gospel, chances are it may be explained in the homily. There are lots of jokes out there about bad homilies, but Good Shepherd is blessed with particularly good homilists. Each has his own approach to Scripture, his own favorite themes and spiritual emphases, his own unique speaking style. But they will all give you something to think about, all challenge you, all point you toward a deeper relationship with Christ

The Profession of Faith – After a brief period of silence (similar to the silence after Communion—and again, the similarity is not accidental), we profess the basic tenets of our faith by praying the Nicene Creed. This is, in a way, a direct response to the Gospel. We’re publicly proclaiming, “Having experienced God in His Word, *this is what I believe.*” The Nicene Creed dates back to the 4th century, though credal formulas go all the way back to the 1st, and it’s good to remember the early Christians, especially the martyrs, as we pray the Creed. We take its clauses pretty much for granted, but for the early Christians the Creed was a list of beliefs that could get them killed. It might refresh our own praying of the Creed if line-by-line we asked ourselves, “Would I die for this?”

The Prayer of the Faithful – And just as we’re pivoting from the Liturgy of the Word into the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we take a very beautiful, very human, very humble moment to turn to God in petition. Approaching Him as a community, we intercede on behalf of the Church, the world, the community, and ourselves, affirming our trust in His mercy and love.



Map of the Mass: Liturgy of the Eucharist – Part 1

As we move into the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we approach what the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls “the source and summit of the Christian life ... For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely, Christ Himself.” Not a *symbol* of Christ Himself, but “*namely*, Christ Himself”. Catholic faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is grounded first of all in Scripture, specifically Jesus’ own words in John 6, but also in Church sacramental practice in the very earliest Christian communities. The Christians in Rome didn’t risk their lives going to liturgies in the catacombs because they wanted to eat bread. They wanted to encounter the Living Christ present in the Eucharist. As Catholics, we don’t *believe* that Christ is truly present under the species of bread and wine. *We know it.*

The Preparation of the Gifts (a.k.a. The Offertory) – Unfortunately this part of the Mass can be misunderstood as simply “setting the table” or just saying a blessing over the gifts, but, as Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out, “there is much more going on here than merely blessing. This humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father.” And, like every part of

the Mass, it’s rich with meaning and history, each of its liturgical gestures moving back and forth across centuries. Even something as simple as throwing our collection envelope into the basket goes back to the very earliest Christian liturgies, where food and money were collected for distribution to community members in need and the poor in general. The preparation of the gifts themselves goes back to the sacrificial tradition of the Temple in Jerusalem—and even farther back to the offering of bread and wine by Melchizedek in the Book of Genesis. The blessing the priest says over the bread and wine is a traditional prayer from Passover (i.e., the same prayer Jesus probably said over the bread and wine at the Last Supper). The **Washing of the Hands** goes back to the purification rites that were part of Temple sacrifice. Once the preparation is complete, the priest calls us to join him in prayer (“Pray, my brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours...”/“May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands...”) and collects the community’s prayer in a final **Prayer Over the Offerings**.

The Eucharistic Prayer – The Eucharistic Prayer itself starts out with **The Preface**. There's a wide range of Prefaces: "common" Prefaces; Prefaces for liturgical seasons, Marian Prefaces; Prefaces for the saints, for the dead. But they all have the same theme: they all recognize and celebrate God's action in salvation history, the mystery of it, the glory of it. They are all prayers of thanksgiving and of high praise, and the arc of that praise always leads directly into **The Sanctus (a.k.a. The Holy, Holy, Holy)**. Another non-coincidence in the brilliant, nearly symphonic structure of the Mass: Just as we praised God in the Gloria before moving into The Liturgy of the Word, now we sing His praises again as we move into the heart of The Liturgy of the Eucharist. AND: Just as it was angels who gave us the first two lines of the Gloria, angels also taught us the first two lines of the Sanctus. When the prophet Isaiah had his vision of the Throne of God (the vision that launched his prophetic career), guess what the throngs of angels around the throne were singing: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts, all the earth is filled with His glory!" Liturgically this seems to be saying that in both cases—the Word and the Eucharist—we've moving onto such holy ground that only the angels can possibly set the correct tone for us.

Something to Note: The Eucharistic Prayer makes clear that it is a prayer offered, not to Christ, but to the Father. It's worship offered to the Father by Christ as it was at the moment of his passion, death and resurrection, but now it's offered through the priest acting in the person of Christ. It's offered as well by all of the baptized, who are part of Christ's Body, the Church. This is why the priest offers the prayer in the first person plural (e.g., "Therefore, O Lord, we humbly implore you..."). This "we" signifies that all the baptized present at the Eucharistic celebration make the sacrificial offering in union with Christ, and pray the Eucharistic Prayer in union with Him. And we do not offer Christ alone; we are called to *offer ourselves*, our lives, our individual efforts to grow more like Christ and our efforts as a community of believers to spread God's Word and to serve God's people.

Toward the end of this invocation, the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine, asking the Holy Spirit to come down and turn them into the Body and Blood of Jesus—and **The Consecration** has begun. Picking up the host, the priest begins recounting what Jesus did at the Last Supper, how He took bread, broke it, gave it to His disciples, saying (he now bows slightly over the bread, acknowledging the sacredness of what's about to happen), saying, "TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT OF IT, FOR THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU." These are the **Words of Institution**. The bread has just become the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He then takes the chalice and, again repeating Jesus' words at the Last Supper, transforms the wine into the Blood of Jesus. Sometimes there are bells and incense at this moment. Sometimes there's just silence.

We are now at the very heart of the Mystery: Christ with us. Christ among us. Christ in us. Immediately after each of the species, the bread and the wine, have been consecrated, they are held up for the whole congregation to see and venerate in a gesture called **The Elevation**. Most prayer books recommend that as we gaze at the Body and the Blood, we simply say, "My Lord and my God."

It's really all there is to say.

Map of the Mass: Liturgy of the Eucharist – Part 2

Emerging from the silence and sacredness of **The Consecration**, we express the depth of what has just taken place on the altar by proclaiming **The Mystery of Faith**. There are several formulations of this proclamation (“We proclaim your death, O Lord...”; “When we eat this bread and drink this cup...”; “Save us, Savior of the World...”), but each of them acknowledges that we are now standing at the crossroad of Death and Resurrection, at the very heart of salvation history. The Living Sacrifice is now lying on the altar.

The Mass is often referred to as a “memorial sacrifice”, and as **The Eucharistic Prayer** continues, it traces the mystical interweaving of memory and eternity. First we **remember** (here’s the memorial part) that we were commanded by Christ Himself to celebrate this sacrifice—the eternal sacrifice of the Cross made present again on the altar—and by doing so to recall His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Gathered together into one by this sacrifice and united to it, we, as the Church, **offer** it and ourselves, through the Spirit, to the Father. And, finally, we **ask** that the sacrifice might be pleasing to God; that He might bless us and bring us into communion with the people He has called to Himself through all ages and who, through His Son, has called us into eternity.

The Doxology – As the liturgical punctuation point to this extraordinary prayer, the priest holds up the Body and Blood of Christ for all to see and intones the Doxology: “Through Him, and with Him and in Him, O God, Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are Yours, forever and ever.” A doxology is a short hymn of praise—the one we use most frequently is the Glory Be—and here it gloriously connects the Mystery of the Eucharist to the Mystery of the Trinity. Not just connects it, really, but actually places it at the very heart of Triune Love. Our response, of course, is the **Great Amen**. (Note: Whether singing it or saying it, this is no time to be shy. It’s not called “Great” for nothing.)

The Lord’s Prayer – One of the great mysteries of our relationship to God is that He is both utterly transcendent (i.e., utterly beyond us and our comprehension) while at the same time utterly intimate, closer to us than we can imagine, knowing us, as St. Paul tells us, “far better than we know ourselves” (Romans 8:27). In an acknowledgement of that mysterious relationship—and in a stroke of liturgical genius—we move from the grand transcendence of The Doxology into the most intimate prayer of the Church: The Our Father. Intimate because every single phrase of it, every petition, is grounded in a child’s love, a child’s trust in its father. And intimate, of course, because it’s the prayer that Jesus Himself taught us. (After the first time He said it for the Apostles, you can imagine Peter saying, “Say that again.”). And, after having acknowledged together that we’re all children of God, we turn to one another in the **Sign of Peace** and for ten, twenty seconds, do exactly what Jesus commanded us to do: love each other, friend and stranger, simply because they’re there.

The Agnus Dei (aka The Lamb of God) – John the Baptist was the first person to call Jesus the Lamb of God (John 1:36), a foreshadowing (i.e., part of John the Baptist’s prophetic vision) of Jesus’ taking on—and superseding—the role of the paschal lamb. Just as at the first Passover the blood of the lamb protected the Hebrews from the Angel of Death and freed them from their slavery to the Egyptians, so the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, frees us from death and from slavery to sin. And the whole liturgy has just moved definitively back to the Last Supper. As we sing the Agnus Dei, the priest is breaking the consecrated bread, just as, the Gospel tells us, Jesus broke the bread before giving it to His disciples at the Last Supper. Holding the halves of the host over the chalice containing the Precious Blood, the priest

holds them up and proclaims: “Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him Who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb!” And we, in what is possibly the most human moment of the liturgy, acknowledge that we are utterly unworthy to do what we’re about to do: take into our own bodies the Body of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Communion – From the very beginning, from the first moment of Creation, our relationship with God has been fairly clear-cut: God gives; we receive. Yes, we give back to some degree, the saints to a great degree. Yet even the saints would say that they only gave back in proportion to the enormity of what they had received. The equation remains the same: God gives; we receive. And God gives to us most fully, most lovingly, most miraculously, when He give us Himself in the Eucharist. It’s the most extraordinary moment of our life, and we get to do it every week (every day, if you like). This is why the Church wants us to be prepared for it, not to take it for granted; why we examine our conscience to be sure we’re not in a state of grave sin before receiving; why we honor the eucharistic fast (at least one hour); why the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that everything about us—the way we’re dressed; the way we approach the altar; the way we extend our hands for the Host—should “convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest.” This is why we sit in silence after communion—because only reverent silence can express the wonder of what’s going on inside of us: of Christ folding His life into ours, folding our life into His. In that silence we are, all of us, for a few moments, sitting in Eternity. In Heaven. Savor that. Praise God for that.



Understanding the Mass

Concluding Rites

Map of the Mass – The Concluding Rites

The Prayer After Communion – After the distribution of Communion, whatever consecrated hosts remain are returned to the tabernacle (this, of course, is why just about any time of the day you come into church, someone is praying before the tabernacle) and the sacred objects that have held the Body and Blood of Christ—the paten and the chalice, respectively—are purified and the altar is cleared. The priest may then go to the presider’s chair or remain at the altar. In any case, he’ll maintain the post-Eucharist silence a few moments longer and then say, “Let us pray.” Similar to the Collect at the very beginning of Mass, the Prayer after Communion is a short prayer of praise and thanksgiving, in this case specifically for the infinite graces bestowed by our union with Christ in the Eucharist.

[Then, as we all well know, we may be invited to sit down for **a few brief announcements...**]

Greeting and Blessing – Then the priest says, just before he blesses us in the name of the Triune God, “The Lord be with you” and we respond, “And with your spirit.” This is the fourth time we’ve made this exchange: we did it at the very beginning of Mass; we did it again right before the Reading of the Gospel; we did it again at the beginning of The Eucharistic Prayer; and now we’re doing it again before we’re blessed and sent out into the world. Why do we keep coming back to this exchange? Why does it punctuate these significant moments in the Mass? The exchange itself goes back to the very earliest days of the Church (it first shows up in a written document around 215). In saying, “The Lord be with you,” the priest is expressing the desire that we might have a dynamic sense of God’s Presence as we move deeper and deeper into it during the course of the Eucharist, and our “And with your spirit” expresses our desire that that same dynamic might enlighten and enflame the spirit that was imparted to the priest by ordination as he guides us, as Christ’s consecrated representative, through each step of this intimate encounter with the Crucified and Risen Lord. So why do we say it at the end of Mass? Isn’t the encounter over?

The Dismissal – By no means is the encounter over. The various formulations of The Dismissal (“Go forth, the Mass is ended,” “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord”, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”) are all attempts to capture the essence of the Latin original: “Ite, missa est.” That “missa”, actually, is where the word “Mass” comes from and, more importantly, it shares the same Latin root as

the word “mission”. It literally means, “Go, you are sent.” So The Dismissal isn’t really a dismissal, it’s a sending. We’re being sent out to into the world to bear witness to our encounter with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. So, just as the Mass is a memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, The Dismissal, in a way, is the Ascension, specifically Christ’s Great Commission to the Apostles just before He ascended to go out and spread the Good News to the whole world. We are not, as the angels admonished the Apostles, just to “stand there staring at the sky” (Acts 1:11). We’re to get moving. Souls are starving all around us. Nourished by Word and Sacrament, we’re to go out there and feed them.

Come and join us for Mass! Our schedule is as follows:



Saturday

5:00 PM English

Sunday

8:30 AM English

10:00 AM Spanish Choir

12:00 PM English Choir

6:00 PM Spanish

8:00 PM English