

Understanding the Mass

Sr. Angela Hibbard IHM

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DEDICATION

This pamphlet is dedicated to Mary Alma Mater

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WHAT DO WE DO AT MASS?

Every Sunday we, the 'body of Christ', gather at the celebration of the Eucharist to become ever more "The Body of Christ". This is an awesome truth. All the actions, words, hymns, postures, sights, sounds, and even moments of silence at the celebration have as their ultimate goals the glorification of God and our own transformation.

One of the most important thing that we are called to do at the celebration of the Eucharist is to open ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit who effects our transformation. As we pray the words of the Mass with the priest and community, as we sing the words of the hymns, as we hear and reflect on the words of the scriptures, as we stand and sit and kneel one with everyone in this community gathered, the Holy Spirit is at work in us. As we proclaim our faith, as we remember what Christ has done for us, as we adore the Blessed Sacrament, as we turn to one another and extend the sign that we want to be at peace with everyone in our lives, as we pray that the Father forgives us as we forgive others, the Holy Spirit is drawing us into a deeper and deeper realization of what it means when Christ commands us to be holy even as the heavenly Father is holy.

Years ago Kathleen Hughes wrote the story of Godfrey Diekman, a Benedictine monk who spent his lifetime helping others come to an understanding and appreciation of the Mass. One of his memorable sayings was: "What good is it if the bread (and wine) is changed and we are not?" This short sentence is one that holds the key to what we do at the Mass. We surrender ourselves to power of the Holy Spirit who little by little changes us.

DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME - THE CHURCH FOLLOWS THE COMMAND OF JESUS

At every Eucharistic celebration we hear the words “Do this in memory of me” and are reminded of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us in their gospels that Jesus blessed, broke, and gave bread to those he had gathered for this meal telling them that this was his body. He blessed, and gave wine to them as well telling them this was his blood. And then Luke tells us he commanded them to “Do this in memory of me”. At first it is possible to think that what was being commanded was simply to gather for a meal and repeat these actions in memory of Jesus.

But John’s gospel gives us a deeper perspective on these words and the meaning that Jesus wished to convey by them. John tells us that before the meal Jesus took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin and proceeded to kneel before each of the disciples and wash their feet. When all had been washed he said: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” In other words, do this in memory of me. Live as I have lived as a servant to all.

We gather every Sunday for this sacred meal to remember what the Lord did at the Last Supper. And we gather every Sunday for this sacred meal to remember what Jesus did

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throughout his whole life. He was servant of all and calls us to be the same. It is through the celebration of the Eucharist that Holy Spirit changes us as he changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. We are sent from this celebration through the church doors to the whole world, with its joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties to bring the presence of Christ to our world.

CHRIST IS PRESENT IN HIS CHURCH

Our God is a God who is always with us. God walked with Adam in the Garden, he spoke to Moses in the burning bush, and he protected the fleeing Israelites with pillars of fire and cloud. God was present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, he sent prophets to chide and guide his chosen people. Finally he sent his only Son, Christ, the Lord who lived, suffered, died, was raised from the dead, and promised: I am with you always, to the end of the age. [St. Matthew 28:20]

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles and they became the living church. Since that day the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the Eucharist. It is at the celebration of the Eucharist that we become most aware of Christ's presence in his Church. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy teaches us that Christ uses a variety of means to allow us to become aware of his presence.

- He is present in the assembly that has gathered to pray and sing and who in the gathering become the mystical body of Christ.
- He is present in the Word proclaimed since it is he himself who speaks when the Scriptures are proclaimed.
- He is present in the person of the priest. It is Christ who, through the ministry of the priest, offers himself on the cross to the Father.

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- He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes.
- He is present especially under the Eucharistic species.

But it is not enough that Christ is present in his Church. It is important for each of us to be present to him. St. Augustine in reflecting on his life before his conversion said: “You were with me, but I was not with you!” Without Christ we are lost. With Christ we are saved. Only with Christ can we achieve our purpose in life to be holy.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Many times when people come together to prepare for a special celebration of the Eucharist one of the questions they ask is: “What shall we choose as the theme for the celebration?” This is the wrong question to ask. There is only one theme at every Mass – one mystery that the Eucharist celebrates – the Paschal Mystery.

The word Paschal comes to us from the Hebrew word Pesach which was the first great feast of the Jewish liturgical year, the Passover. It commemorated how the Angel of Death “passed over” the homes of the Israelites, which were marked with the blood of the lamb. The angel killed only the firstborn of the Egyptians. As a result of God’s action the Israelites received freedom from the slavery in Egypt and a new life as the “people of God”.

At every Eucharist we celebrate the Paschal Mystery – the “new Passover”. We believe that Christ – the Lamb of God – suffered, and died for us on the Cross. We believe that God raised him from the dead and that his sacrifice of love reestablished the intimate relationship that existed between God and humankind at creation. We believe that Christ’s sacrifice saved all people, destroyed the power of death, and that by it all people are invited to be fully united with God forever, as Christ was and is and ever shall be.

But the Paschal Mystery refers not just to Jesus’ death and resurrection...but also refers to our participation in that mystery. That is what we come together to do at every celebration of the Eucharist. As we open ourselves to the dying that still needs to happen in us...the dying to pride,

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prejudice, anger, etc....and yield to the power of the Holy Spirit who is constantly at work to change us, we participate more deeply in the Paschal Mystery.

Our life is a process of conversion into Christ...he is the image of what we are meant to be. Would that one day we could cry out with Paul: "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." [Galatians 2:20]

WHO CELEBRATES THE MASS?

Every time we come together to celebrate the Eucharist Christ is present with us. It is Christ who leads us in this prayer of praise and worship of God, the Father. The Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council teaches us that "...every liturgical celebration ... is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body the Church." [CSL #7] The challenge for each of us is to acknowledge our identity as part of the Body of Christ, and to fulfill our proper role as one of faithful in this prayer of praise and worship.

PARTICIPATION IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST

“The full, conscious, and active participation by all the people in liturgical celebrations is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.” [Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Liturgy, #14]

This statement continues to be foundational for the proper implementation of the sacred liturgy. When the community gathers to celebrate the Eucharist it does not gather to watch as an audience would watch a play. Rather, it gathers to “do”. But what does this “doing” consist of?

The community gathers “so that it may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves”. [CSL #48] All of the actions they “do” together express their unity in the Body of Christ. These actions include making the Sign of the Cross, standing to pray, sitting to listen, kneeling in adoration, singing, keeping reverent silence, offering the sacrifice and themselves, receiving the Eucharist, and going to bring the presence of Christ to the world.

At every Eucharistic celebration there are functions that some individuals who have special gifts or roles “do”. They have been called upon and trained to use those gifts for the benefit of the community. These include:

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- those who have musical skills who help the community to fulfill its role of singing the praise and honor of God
- those whose voices have been trained to proclaim the readings.

They continually study the scriptures to enhance their understanding so that their gift of proclaiming the Word helps the community to hear the voice of Christ in his Word

□ some who have a great devotion for the Eucharist, who have understood and practice bringing the presence of Christ to their daily lives are called forth to assist the priest, when necessary, to distribute the Eucharist to the community

□ there is the priest who, after many years in formation and continued prayer and study, was ordained so that he can properly lead this celebration in “ persona Christi”. □ there are also individuals who serve at the altar, who greet, welcome and care for the community gathered, who get everything ready for the celebration of the Eucharist

Truly the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy has helped us better understand what the Church has believed since her beginnings, that the celebration of the Eucharist is a gathering of those who believed and came together to do what Christ had commanded them to do.

THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

When the Church gathers for the celebration of the Eucharist, the Introductory Rites are meant to focus the community's attention on the mystery to be celebrated and prepare them to participate more worthily in that mystery. There are many elements used in these rites:

Entrance Procession and Hymn In every celebration of the Eucharist the procession of liturgical ministers into the midst of the people who have gathered is led by the Cross. We are Christians who follow the Cross on which Christ died to save us from our sins. That same Christ is here with us for He promised... "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) Christ is present in the community gathered. He is present in the priest who makes visible to the eyes of faith what is invisible. It is Christ who will lead us in this celebration. All have come together to praise and honor God for the gift of his only Son, who reveals to us the way to eternal happiness. The Cross is accompanied by at least two lighted candles and sometimes by incense. The Gospel Book is carried by the deacon and placed on the altar where later the bread and wine will be placed because the food of the Word cannot be separated from the food of the Eucharist. And we sing.

Sign of the Cross Upon reaching the chair the priest leads the assembly in the Sign of the Cross to remind us of our baptism which gave us the right to participate in this mystery. Romano Guardini, the noted theologian, wrote: "When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross...let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it

includes the whole of us... It is the holiest of signs.” (Sacred Signs, 1956, p.13) Allow Christ who was crucified on the cross to touch our bodies and draw us into the mystery.

Greeting Upon arriving at the chair the priest greets the assembly. The Lord be with you. This greeting is in reality expressive of the desire that the people actually experience the presence and power of the Lord in the community they form. It is Christ who greets us with this wish. The assembly responds: And with your Spirit. This response will be a new for us. It is a more formal language, to be sure. But it is there to remind us that this gathering is not just like any other gathering. It is special. By restoring the more literal ancient greeting “And with your Spirit” the community will be calling more expressly on the “spirit” of the priest.

Act of Penitence One of the things that Christ was most frequently criticized for by leaders of the Jews was that he drew sinners to himself. He ate with sinners; he cured sinners and reached out to sinners who were most in need of God’s mercy. As the community of faithful gathers to celebrate this paschal mystery it acknowledges that it too is a sinful people. We confess our sinfulness to God, to each other, and to all the angels and saints.

Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling with Water During the Easter Season and sometimes on Sundays and more solemn occasions the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling may be used as a reminder of our baptism and thereby of our call to share in the Paschal Mystery.

Gloria This hymn is often called the Angelic Hymn because its first words are the words the angels used at birth of Christ in Bethlehem. As we join the choirs of angels and sing the glory and praise of God we are reminded of the great gift God has given to us in the Incarnation. Christ was sent by the Father, to become truly flesh of our flesh and like us

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in all things but sin. We are filled with awe that God would do this for us and so we cry out in hymn the glory of God the Father, in his Son, and through the Holy Spirit. Although it is permitted to recite the Gloria we must realize that something of the awesomeness of the mystery it reminds us of can be lost in mere recitation.

Opening Prayer [Collect] The Introductory Rites end with the Opening Prayer or Collect, the prayer of the gathered community who, having acknowledged its sinfulness but having rejoiced in the Triune God, is now aware that it is in God's presence. The community is invited to pray and given a brief time to silently present its needs to God. The priest then collects these prayers and presents them to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The people make the prayer their own by responding Amen. We are now prepared to hear God's Word.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

At the celebration of the Eucharist we are nourished at two tables...the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. Both are necessary. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says: “When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to his people and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel”. (GIRM, n.29) We need to ponder these words and make them our own.

The words of Sacred Scripture are a way God reveals himself to us, the means by which we come to know the depth of God's love for us and the responsibilities entailed in being Christ's followers, members of his Body. What is more, this Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy possesses a special power to bring about in us what it proclaims. At the celebration of the Eucharist God speaks and we respond. First, God speaks through the stories of the Old Testament. We respond with a moment of silence then a sung psalm, in other words, we use the Word of God to respond to the Word of God. The psalm assigned for the day's readings helps us to uncover the core meaning and challenge of the first reading. We respond with a moment of silence. Then the Gospel is proclaimed. There are special honors which we give to the Gospel: for example, the Book of the Gospels has been carried in the Entrance Procession and placed on the altar; just before the Gospel is read the assembly stands and sings Alleluia to welcome Christ present in the Gospel as the deacon or priest carries the Gospel book to the ambo; the Gospel may be incensed before the reading and is kissed at its conclusion.

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Throughout all of this we are called to listen... to listen as we would if our eyes were open and we could see Christ speaking to us. We are invited to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who will reveal what in our life needs to change so that we could be more like Christ. The Word of God is living and active. Each of us individually, and all of us together, are called to make a response that affects our daily lives.

Henri Nouwen tells a wonderful story that may shed some light on this process. A sculptor was chipping away a huge block of marble. A little boy watched him work for many weeks until, finally, he was amazed to see that the sculptor had created a beautiful lion. The little boy ran up to the sculptor with eyes wide with wonder, and he exclaimed, "Hey, Mister, how did you know there was a lion hidden in that rock?"

God is the sculptor. We are a block of marble. If we allow the word of God to chip away at us, the possibilities that lie within us will come to vision.

THE CREED

On Sundays and solemnities the Creed is to be sung or said by the priest together with the people. The purpose of this prayer is to call to mind and confess the great mysteries of the faith before the mysteries are celebrated in the Eucharist.

There will be some changes to the words used in the Nicene Creed that is usually used at Mass. Permission has been granted to use the Apostles Creed especially during Lent and Easter time. More importantly we are reminded once again about the rubric¹ that is to be included when the Creed is recited, namely:

[in the Nicene Creed] all bow at the words “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man,”

[in the Apostles Creed] all bow at the words “who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born the Virgin Mary,”

By this simple gesture we profess our belief in the Incarnation. This simple bow reminds us of what Paul taught: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled

¹ “rubric” is a direction of how something is to be done.

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himself and became obedient, to the point of death – even death on a cross.” [Philippians 2: 5-8]

THE PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

The last part of the Liturgy of the Word is called the Prayer of the Faithful, the prayer of the baptized. In this prayer the baptized have a special opportunity to exercise their priestly ministry.

The bishop or priest opens this prayer with an invitation to the assembly: Let us pray... Next the deacon or another minister announces the intentions and the community responds with a common prayer. Finally, the priest gathers up all the intentions and directs them to the God.

In the scriptures Christ has been teaching us how to be concerned about all peoples, how to be servant of all peoples. The way we pray the Prayer of the Faithful, reveals how well we have learned the lessons Christ has taught us. In preparing these intentions it will be important to ask ourselves: “What” or “Who” in our world [the whole world] needs the compassion of Christ, his mercy, his healing, and his tenderness.

The challenge in composing the intentions is to make them as universal as possible while at the same time attending to the needs of the community at worship. This is not the time to single out one individual or group of individuals from the immediate community. Rather, this is the time to pray for all individuals who may have the same need as some individuals in our community. [Ex. For all those who lack food, work, and shelter, we pray to the Lord.]

One of the greatest dangers in composing these intentions is the temptation to propose the answer to the need prayed for by including a “that phrase”. In a word, we tell God what

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to do. These kinds of petitions are prayers in which we presume that we know better than God how to answer this need.

Another difficulty is that the community response sometimes lacks a prayer quality. It becomes a sing-song response of semi-conscious assembly. Inviting the community to sing its response can have the effect of slowing the response and making it more deliberate. There are many simple sung responses, such as: “O God, hear us, hear our prayer”, or “Lord, hear our prayer” that can enhance the quality of this prayer.

Lastly, it is important for the community to understand that all that has been prayed is carried forth with the procession of gifts. All are placed in Christ’s hands for transformation.

THE PREPARATION OF THE ALTAR AND GIFTS

The seemingly simple and utilitarian action of bringing forth gifts and setting the table is actually a profound moment in the Mass. The spiritual meaning of this action is that the faithful are offering themselves along with the gifts in this Eucharistic celebration.

Bread and wine are brought forward. The wheat and grapes used in their production a a gift from God, but God has not made the bread and wine from these gifts, we have. These gifts represent cooperation between God, the Creator, and his creatures, human beings.

Bread and wine are very strong symbols in themselves. Bread is among the most basic of foods common in every culture. It is “the staff of life” representing what we need to stay alive. Wine is at the other end of the food spectrum. It is elegant, refined, and festive. Wine is a symbol of living well. Psalm 104 tells us that “wine gladdens men’s hearts.”

Jesus takes these two powerful natural symbols and makes them so much more by turning them into his very Body and Blood.

We place these gifts in the hands of Christ to be transformed, by placing them in the hands of the priest. By doing so, we ask that our lives may become what Christ’s life was and is.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The Eucharistic Prayer or Canon of the Mass is the central prayer of the entire celebration. Most Catholics have been made aware from their earliest days that during the Eucharistic Prayer the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. What many Catholics are not aware of, however, is that the Eucharistic Prayer is about more than adoring Christ who becomes present in our midst. The Church tells us that liturgy (and the Mass is the highpoint and heart of liturgy) is the action of Christ the priest and His Body, the Church. In the celebration of Mass, during the Eucharistic Prayer, not only does Christ become present, body and blood, soul and divinity, under the forms of bread and wine, but Christ's saving action, His passion, death and resurrection are once again enacted and offered to the Father by Christ Himself in the person of the priest, and by all present.

This is a truth of enormous significance! This action of Christ which brought about our redemption from sin and eternal death, offered once for all on Calvary, becomes present again for us, here and now, in this time and place, so that we can join in Christ's perfect offering and can ourselves participate in His perfect worship.

Read carefully any of the Eucharistic Prayers. You will see that that prayer is offered, not to Christ, but to the Father: Father, you are holy indeed...; Father, we bring you these gifts...; Father, we ask you... It is worship offered to the Father by Christ as it was at the moment of His passion, death and resurrection, but now it is offered through the priest acting in the person of Christ, and it is offered as well

by all of us who are part of Christ's Body, the Church. This is the action of Christ's Body, the Church at Mass.

When the priest prays this prayer he prays we bring you these gifts; we ask you . . . ; we offer. That we signifies that all the baptized present at this Eucharistic celebration make this offering in union with Christ, pray this prayer in union with Him. And what is most important, 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, to the Father in union with Christ through the hands of the priest. Most wonderful of all, although our offering is in itself imperfect, joined with the offering of Christ it becomes perfect praise and thanksgiving to the Father.

And so, during the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, we have more to do than to look forward to the moment of consecration and remain there while the prayer of the priest continues. Before the consecration we join in the prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the Father known as the Preface and affirm that praise and thanksgiving in our singing of the Holy, Holy, Holy. Following the Consecration we join together in the Memorial Acclamation which proclaims our common faith in Christ's real presence and is an acclamation expressing our gratitude to Christ for His wonderful gift of salvation. But then our prayer moves on and we are called to offer Christ, and ourselves with Christ to the Father: 'We offer to you, Father, this holy and living sacrifice...' and to pray with the priest that 'we

who are nourished by His Body and Blood may be filled with the Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ...'; we then join our prayers with the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints for our Holy Father the Pope, our bishops and clergy and all God's people, living and

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dead. At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer the priest sums up all that has gone before: 'Through Him (Christ), with Him (Christ), in Him (Christ) in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever.' And we who are privileged to make our own offering through, with and in Christ, respond with the most important acclamation of the Mass, the great AMEN by which we profess the action of Christ to be our action as well.

THE COMMUNION RITE

The ultimate goal of our Eucharistic celebration is our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ, our Communion. Jesus commands us in the words of the institution narrative to “take and eat” and to “take and drink”. This is the goal that Christ himself sets for us, to be in communion with him and with one another.

We are most immediately prepared for this communion by our prayer in the words of Jesus himself, the Our Father. Two of the petitions in this prayer are directly related to our reception of Holy Communion, asking for our daily bread and asking for forgiveness. The great Fathers of the Church, Tertullian and Cyprian, understood “our daily bread” to be the bread that Jesus was referring to when he said: “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” [John 6:51]

The petition asking for forgiveness is a direct preparation for the reception of Holy Communion. Saint Augustine called this petition a “washing of our face before we receive Communion”.

After the Sign of Peace the immediate preparation for Communion is the Breaking of the Bread which reminds us that the Lord’s body was broken on the cross in order to give life to us.

When we receive the Body of Christ we become what we receive. Saint Augustine preaches, “If it is you that are the Body of Christ and its members, it is the mystery meaning

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you that has been placed on the Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you.”

THE DISMISSAL RITE AT MASS

The Mass ends in a similar way to how it begins, with a ritual greeting. We are liturgically reminded by the words of the priest, “The Lord be with you,” that the dismissal is a new beginning. The Mass is not so much “over”, as it is a new beginning that is connected to the rest of our lives.

In the Latin Mass text the final words of the priest are, “Ite, missa est.” This can be literally translated as “Go, you are dismissed” or as “Go, your mission now begins.” The Latin word *missa* is the root of both the words, *dismiss* and *mission*. For centuries we called the whole liturgical act by the term *Mass* (*Missa* in Latin) to remind ourselves that the celebration is not a self-contained act. What we are to do is to take what we celebrate out into the world.

We have received the greatest gift possible from God and every gift of God brings with it a new task. We who celebrate this great act of thanksgiving are called to go forth into the world and to live thankful lives spreading the good news of God’s wonderful grace.

Additional Essays on the Mass

THE GATHERING RITES

THE GATHERING MEANS SOMETHING

For moviegoers, “being together” isn’t necessary for enjoying the show. People enter, find seats, watch previews, eat popcorn, chat with friends, and wait for the movie to begin. This sense of separateness sometimes disappears if the whole group responds to the action together. Shared laughter, shared surprise, shared fear change the air and transform an audience into a fleeting community.

Once upon a time, going to church was similar to entering a theater. People entered silently and prayed privately. Once Mass began, the priest on his “stage” did all the important things himself. The communion procession included everyone, but very little else really helped worshipers to feel any community togetherness. The liturgical reforms of the 1960s tried to change all this.

When the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist, experiencing community is central to its meaning. We are encouraged to greet one another and especially to welcome and assist guests. The Introductory Rites themselves are designed to form us into a community, and many other parts of the liturgy help us to retain that sense of connectedness. During the opening procession, the dialogue with the presider, the expression of repentance, the sung Glory to God, and the opening prayer we constantly interact with various ministers and with one another. We sing, respond to our leader, sign ourselves with the cross, and pray both silently and aloud. All these elements of the Introductory Rites help focus our attention and prepare us to participate in

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the mystery to be celebrated. They also help us to set aside our private concerns and to become “one flock led by one Shepherd” who takes us to green pastures and feeds us from the twin tables of Word and Sacrament. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, the community gathers “so that it may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves” (CSL #48). When we experience ourselves as a community, we become able to achieve this goal.

THE OPENING PROCESSION

Anyone who has ever watched the opening of the Olympics recognizes that it is strictly choreographed. At the beginning, the head of the Olympic Committee always receives the host country’s head of state. At the end, the host country’s national anthem is always sung. In between, the traditional “opening rites” are always beautiful, entertaining, impressive, and somehow moving. Perhaps most moving is the procession of the athletes with their national flags. The human heart recognizes in these rites an archetypal longing to “gather the nations” in peace and harmony before the competition begins.

All processions, even secular ones, are symbolic movement through time and space. They provide a formal beginning of whatever “work” we are about to do. Just so, in every Eucharist the procession of liturgical ministers into the midst of the gathered assembly is a kind of highway marker which says, “You (plural) are now leaving ordinary time and space and entering a sacred precinct where you (plural) and God will meet and share life together.”

Israel’s journey from Egypt and marching through the desert to the Promised Land is the prototype of our liturgical processions. God led this first procession in a pillar of cloud

by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex 13:21-22). So we, in the opening procession of a Mass when incense is used, follow the fragrant cloud and are reminded of that sacred Presence which never leaves us. Next comes the cross, the sign of our salvation. Candles flank the cross to help us recall the Paschal Candle, that great Pillar of Fire we kindled at the Easter Vigil. Next come the ministers – the lector, the deacon carrying the Book of the Gospels, and finally the presider, who leads our community prayer as Jesus led His followers. All these ministers and the assembly sing some song which prepares us for the scriptures we will hear and the sacred meal we will share. Remembering that Jesus is among us, the procession forms us into a community gathered in His name (Mt 18:20) and ready to meet God.

THE OPENING DIALOGUE

After the opening procession ascends the altar platform, the presider leads the community in the Sign of the Cross. This body prayer first given to us at Baptism identifies us as one with Christ. Romano Guardini, a German theologian and liturgist, advises: “When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross....Let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us.... It is the holiest of signs” (Sacred Signs, St. Louis, 1956, p.13ff).

Next, priest and people begin the first of many dialogues – exchanges we hardly notice, since everyone knows them by heart. In fact the whole Mass is a continual “conversation” between assembly and ministers – greetings (“The Lord be with you);” calls to action (“Let us pray”) and acclamations (“The Word of the Lord”). This feature of Catholic liturgy helps us to achieve that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgy that the Council fathers sought. It also

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shows that the whole assembly, priest and people, do this sacred action together as the one Body of Christ.

The new edition of the Roman Missal will require us to learn some new words for these exchanges so that our responses come closer to the original Latin. For instance, one option for the presider's first greeting now reads, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is a direct quote from Romans 1:7 (and seven other Pauline letters!)* Paul was using a typical opening greeting, the rough equivalent of, "Dear Romans, How are you? I am fine." To us the language seems convoluted, and we wouldn't use it in everyday English. However, we are restoring it – and the response, "And with your spirit," (from the Latin, "Et cum spiritu tuo") – in order to claim our Christian roots in scripture and tradition. These solemn ritual words remind us that this gathering is not like any other gathering. It is special.

* I Cor 1:3, 2 Cor 1:2, Gal 1:3, Eph 1:2, Phil 1:2, 2 Thes 1:2, Philemon 3

PREPARATION FOR OUR SHARED PRIESTLY ACTION

Jesus continually scandalized Israel's religious leaders because He ate with sinners, cured sinners, and said outrageous things like, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mk 2:17). Jesus has not changed; and when we, His followers, come together for liturgy, we come as a community of sinners saved by His passover from death to life. Because of this, acknowledging our sinfulness and asking to be freed and forgiven are appropriate during the Gathering Rites. As He did when He walked the earth, Jesus welcomes us, lifts us up from our sins, and invites us to share in the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Penitential acts at the beginning of the liturgy have a long history. Before the reforms of Vatican II, the opening rites included “I confess to almighty God,” an absolution, two silent prayers asking for release from sin and God’s forgiveness, and the “Lord have mercy” litany – all in Latin. This heavy emphasis on sin came from a kind of “ritual build-up.” All the various prayers originated at different times and places and were simply continued in Paul V’s Roman Missal of 1570.

The Sacramentary of Paul VI retained most of these expressions of repentance, but they were not to be used together. Since each one sets a different tone for the liturgy, parishes have often determined their use according to the liturgical season. The “I confess to almighty God...” is appropriate for Lent, the sprinkling rite in the Easter season, and various wordings of the “Lord have mercy” litany during Ordinary time. The third edition of the Roman Missal continues the practice of the Vatican II reform but translates the Latin to closely match the Latin editio typica. These three different “beginnings” help Christians become aware of ourselves as a sinful people who, nonetheless, are invited to share in the double feast of Word and Table with the Risen Lord who welcomes us.

GLORY TO GOD

Christ was sent by the Father, to become truly flesh of our flesh and like us in all things but sin. Filled with awe that God would do this for us, we join in the ancient song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will” (Luke 2:14). These words are slightly changed from what we have been using – “Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth” – since they more closely approximate the Latin text.

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A little history of the hymn, called from ancient times the “Angelic Hymn,” connects us to our Eastern Rite brothers and sisters. The Gloria was probably written in North Africa as a morning praise song perhaps as early as the 2nd century. Hilary, bishop of Poitiers in the mid-4th century, is said to have introduced it into the West. He would have discovered it during his banishment in Phrygia (modern-day Turkey), and possibly introduced it in Europe because of its clear acknowledgment of the Trinitarian mystery – co-equal Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At that time, this doctrinal position was then being challenged by Arian heretics.

In our day, as we join the choirs of angels in singing the glory and praise of God, we remember the great gift God has given to us in the Incarnation. Jesuit liturgist Rev. Joseph Jungmann beautifully says, Every day that the Church lives, every time the Church gathers her children in prayer, and particularly when she assembles them for the Eucharist, a new light flashes across the world and the Church beholds, with mingled joy and longing, the approach of the Kingdom of God, the advent, in spite of every obstacle of the consummation of the great plan: that glory will come to God, and to [human beings] of God’s choice, peace and salvation (Mass of the Roman Rite, 1 volume edition, p. 235).

THE OPENING PRAYER

The Introductory Rites end with the Opening Prayer, or Collect, the first communal prayer of the day. Everything preceding this moment has prepared us for the Liturgy of the Word to follow. Finally, as sinners standing in God’s presence and singing praise with the angels, we are invited to pray. The rubrics (ritual instructions in the missal) say, And all pray in silence with the Priest for a moment.

Then the Priest, with hands extended, says the Collect prayer, at the end of which the people acclaim: Amen.

Each of these simple words constitutes a thread of meaning in that complex tissue of actions and words through which liturgy expresses our relationship to one another, to our world, and to God. First, we are standing throughout the Gathering Rites, almost as though the opening procession still continues in some way. (We also stand at other points in the liturgy, primarily when we are engaged in a communal priestly action.)

The quiet time allows everyone to settle into the silence and speak to God from the heart. Out of that silence the Priest extends his hands, a prayer gesture as old as Moses and David and our ancient Christian ancestors pictured in the catacombs. (See Ex 17:11-13 and Psalm 141:2.) Then he “collects” our many individual prayers in one single prayer suited to the liturgy of the day which is addressed to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Finally, we make this common prayer our own by saying a resounding “Amen.”

What are these threads of meaning? First, our shared posture shows that we stand together with our priestly leader to intercede for this world and offer ourselves in its service. Our communal silence opens us, as individuals and as a people, to listen to the movement of the Spirit among us. The open arms of the priest-presider embrace us, God’s people, and lift our prayer towards God. Our “Amen” is a cry of assent to all the silent and spoken prayer together. As a community, we are now prepared to hear God’s Word.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

THE OVERALL STRUCTURE AND MEANING

Young adults moving into a first apartment may have just the basics - a table, a chair, a bed, a hotplate, running water. A church also needs “basics” for the liturgy: a baptismal font, chairs for leader and people, and two “tables” – one for proclaiming the Word and one for sharing the Eucharistic Meal. The Liturgy of the Word gathers people around the “table of the Word.”

This part of the Mass has a rhythm of proclamations and responses. The first reading, usually from the Hebrew scriptures, is followed by the people’s acclamation – “Thanks be to God” – and a psalm which uncovers the core meaning and challenge of the text. A second reading from a New Testament letter is followed by the same acclamation. Then all stand to greet the Gospel singing “Alleluia.” After the Gospel proclamation and the people’s acclamation – “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” – the priest responds to the readings through the homily. Then the whole assembly, expressing its communion with the apostolic faith, proclaims a Creed. Finally the Prayer of the Faithful concludes the Liturgy of the Word. This litany of intercession connects the scriptures to real needs, local and worldwide. The people’s cry, calling out to Christ as mediator, is the heart of this intercessory prayer. The presider’s closing prayer completes the Liturgy of the Word.

What do we believe about this part of the Mass? The General Instruction on the Roman Missal says, “When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to

His people and Christ, present in His own word, is proclaiming the Gospel” (GIRM, n.29). This statement grounds our faith regarding the Liturgy of the Word. In the dialogue between ministers and people, the divine Logos, the Word spoken by the Father from all eternity (John 1:1-14), speaks to us personally through the scripture proclaimed and preached. The physical books we use may be honored with processions and incense, but the true Word of the Lord is that transforming Light which fills our minds and hearts and teaches us to live as disciples of Jesus, the Lord.

RITUAL LANGUAGE AND MINISTERS OF THE WORD

Some people dislike ritual. “It’s always the same! Boring!” they say. Meanwhile these very people might see a favorite play or movie over and over – even though it is exactly the same every time. Boredom doesn’t come from repetition. It comes from the combination of inattention and uninspired proclamation. In fact, the sign-language of ritual performed simply, cleanly, and with attention to detail can grab and hold people’s attention – and make a difference.

Every Sunday, the Liturgy of the Word has the same “choreography:” A lector comes

forward, ascends the ambo, proclaims the reading, pauses for a moment, says, “The Word of the Lord,” and returns to a pew or chair after the people’s response. The cantor and assembly sing the psalm. The same thing is repeated for the second reading. While the Gospel acclamation is sung, the deacon or priest walks to the altar, lifts up the Book of the Gospels, and processes to the ambo. Sometimes the book is incensed and kissed. The Gospel is proclaimed and the assembly responds, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.” These things take place with little variation from week to week.

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Perhaps. But the way people move, speak and sing – their pace, posture, intonation, animation, sense of purpose – is also part of the message. Their reverence, their body language, their ability to catch people’s eyes, their obvious love for the Word all speak as loudly as the words they proclaim. Homilists may provide insight about a text; but before they have said a word, lectors, cantors, and deacons have already proclaimed the central truth that God is here among us, speaking to us and inviting us to be transformed. Proclaiming as though it really meant something requires hard work – pondering the text, digging for meaning through prayer and study, and practicing various ways to read or sing the words. Such ministers of the Word communicate both their love for the message and for the God who speaks. When this happens, hearers feel their passion and are moved and enlightened for the week’s journey. It isn’t boring at all.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

STRUCTURE AND MEANING

Mark's Gospel, the first account of Jesus' ministry, tells how Jesus fed the hungry multitude: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before the people." (Mk 6:41) In all four gospels this story, as well as the Eucharistic institution accounts, use these same four verbs in the same order. After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples continued taking, blessing, breaking, and giving believers bread and wine; and whenever they did so, they experienced the presence of the risen Lord (Luke 24:30-31). Our Liturgy of the Eucharist continues what they handed on.

Preparation of Gifts and Table: Jesus took people's ordinary bread. Our "taking" happens when the priest-presider takes our gifts – simple bread and festive wine representing our lives in all their dimensions – and places them on the altar.

Eucharistic Prayer: Jesus blessed God in the words of a prayer every Jew said at every meal: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth." Our "blessing" is the Eucharistic Prayer, in which we praise and thank God, remember Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, and offer the Father, with Jesus, the sacrifice of His life and ours.

Communion Rite: Jesus broke the bread the people offered. Every Jewish meal every day began with the breaking of bread. Our "breaking" happens when the assembly sings

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together to Jesus, the sacrificed Lamb of God, while the priest breaks the consecrated bread we are about to share. Jesus gave the broken bread to His disciples. Our “giving” happens as the priest entrusts the sacred fragments to the other ministers, and all “give” them to the people as they come in procession to the altar.

These four actions recounted in the gospels and in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23-26) have been repeated over and over through the centuries. They bind Christian believers into a holy communion with one another, with our Lord, and – through him – to the Holy Trinity. .

THE PREPARATION OF THE ALTAR-TABLE AND GIFTS

The Liturgy of the Eucharist moves the center of attention from the readings and homily at the ambo to the actions and prayers around the altar table. An altar is not an ordinary piece of furniture. It is consecrated by a bishop, who anoints it with Holy Chrism, incenses it, covers it for the first time with a white cloth, and illuminates it with candles. Through these actions the altar becomes a symbol of Christ, the Anointed One, and a holy place radiating the aura of Christ’s presence. (See *The Rites*, vol 2, “Dedication of an Altar” par. 22a.)

To this sacred altar we bring gifts which symbolize ourselves. Bread, the most basic food in every culture, is “the staff of life”, representing what we need to remain alive. Wine, at the other end of the food spectrum, is elegant, refined and festive, a symbol of living well. These gifts, both “fruit of the earth and work of human hands”, contain within them an immense ecology of human and divine interaction in this world. God’s good earth provides food and drink for us, and we bring these gifts to the altar as strong symbols of our

lives. Besides the bread and wine, we also present “other gifts to relieve the needs of the Church and of the poor” (Roman Missal, par 22). These gifts, a collection of money and sometimes food items, represent our daily labor in yet another way.

All the gifts are taken in solemn procession to the altar. We, the faithful – already the Body of Christ gathered for worship and fed from the Table of the Word – symbolically present ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given to God and to one another in union with Christ, the great sacrificial Gift. The priest, one of us and yet representing Christ our Leader, receives our gifts, praises God for them, and sets them on the altar. In doing so he moves them from the everyday world into the realm of the sacred. This is the first step towards their transformation – and ours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sr. Angela Hibbard IHM is a member of the Archdiocesan Worship Commission. She is on staff at Gesu Parish and has responsibility for parish faith formation, particularly the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). She is also the staff representative to the Christian Service Commission.

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