

**No power in heaven or on earth can give us more than we receive in the Mass.**

The Mass and Eucharist are wonderful gifts for us. Scott Hahn in *The Lamb's Supper: Mass as Heaven on Earth* describes the graces available at every Mass:

*To go to Mass is to receive the fullness of grace, the very life of the Trinity. No power in heaven or on earth can give us more than we receive in the Mass, for we receive God into ourselves.*

Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: Mass as Heaven on Earth*

Let us pray that God opens the eyes of our hearts to the gifts He has prepared for us at every Mass! Amen.

[If you are interested in learning more about the Mass and the Eucharist, you will find Scott Hahn's *Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* an invaluable resource.]

# Mass and the Eucharist

Why do we do what we do at Mass  
and what does it mean?

By  
Deacon Joseph Dockery-Jackson  
St. Pius X Church,  
Rock Island, IL

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Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.  
Bishop of Peoria

## I. The Mass and the Early Church

Three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, describe the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. But did the early church have “Mass” like we do?

The first answer to that question can be found in the Bible itself. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul provides some guidance on how to celebrate the Eucharist:

*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup after supper, saying, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.*

*Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.*

*A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

1 Corinthians 11:23 – 29

A more complete picture of how the early church celebrated the Eucharist can be found in the First Apology of Justin Martyr.

**For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.**

**I enter into certain hearts as into a second Passion.**

*and immensity. And that is the way it is when my prayer is united with [the Church in Mass].*

Dom Chautard, *Soul of the Apostolate*

If we are to be united to the whole church in our celebration of the Mass, it’s important that we approach Mass, and especially the Eucharist worthily. Saint Faustina was a simple Polish nun blessed to have conversations with Jesus. Her spiritual director advised her to keep a diary of these conversations. She writes there about those who approach Communion in a state of serious sin (the words of Jesus are in bold):

*I saw how unwillingly the Lord Jesus came to certain souls in Holy Communion. And he spoke these words to me: **I enter into certain hearts as into a second Passion.***

St. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary Divine Mercy in My Soul # 1598*

While we shouldn’t go to Communion in a state of serious sin, we shouldn’t stay away from Communion because of minor faults. Jesus truly desires to be united with us in the Eucharist:

***Do not omit Holy Communion unless you know well that your fall was serious; apart from this, no doubt must stop you from uniting with Me in the mystery of My love. Your minor faults will disappear in My love like a piece of straw thrown into a great furnace. Know that you grieve Me much when you fail to receive Me in Holy Communion.***

St. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary Divine Mercy in My Soul # 156*

### III. Participating at Mass

At Mass we participate in a celebration that Jesus instituted at the Last Supper and which has remained substantially unchanged for nearly two thousand years. It is where heaven joins earth. What should our attitude be as we prepare for and celebrate Mass?

Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, in *Soul of the Apostolate*, describes how to prepare for Mass:

*I should make a firm, calm act of recollection, in order to free myself from all that has no connection with God, and to fix my attention upon Him. The one I am about to talk to is God.*

Dom Chautard, *Soul of the Apostolate*

Dom Chautard also suggests that we focus on how we are united as Christians in the celebration of the Mass:

*I am united to the whole Church not only through the Communion of Saints, but by virtue of a real act of religion which the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, offers as a society to God.*

Dom Chautard, *Soul of the Apostolate*

We are united with the whole church, and even those who have celebrated Mass for the last two thousand years.

What is the effect of this union?

*A drop of water is nothing. But united with the ocean, it shares in all that power*

The Apology was written to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and his two adopted sons in the year 155. Here's how he explains Mass to the Emperor:

*And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.*

First Apology of Justin Martyr  
Chapter LXVII - Weekly Worship of the  
Christians.

What did these early Christians, living just 120 years after the resurrection of Jesus believe about the bread and wine that

**The one I am  
about to talk to  
is God.**

**Bread and  
wine and  
water are  
brought, and  
the president  
offers prayers  
and  
thanksgiving...**

was distributed during their Sunday gathering? Justin provides the answer:

*And this food is called among us Eucharistia [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body;" and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, "This is My blood;" and gave it to them alone.*

First Apology of Justin Martyr  
Chapter LXVI - Of the Eucharist.

Readers familiar with John's Gospel are not surprised that early Christians believed in the "true presence" of Jesus in the Eucharist. In Chapter 6, we hear how Jesus had just fed the 5,000 with the five loaves

**The food which is blessed by the prayer of His word ... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.**

## **Communion**

The word Communion refers to a family bond - and that's exactly what we have in Communion. The family bonds reach up toward heaven and across the pew to our neighbor.

Before receiving Communion, we recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We also recognize our unworthiness to receive Him and His power to transform us.

In Communion, the God of all creation approaches us as we approach Him. In Communion, we consume the Living Bread, necessary for eternal life. In Communion, our Offertory prayer has been answered. In Communion, we share in the divinity of Christ, the same Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.

## **Dismissal**

We, who share in the divinity of Christ, are now called to bring Christ into the world. After Communion, we literally carry Christ within us. As Christ abides within us, He sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations.

*Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.*

**The God of all creation approaches us as we approach Him.**

Christ wants to work through all of us. Because of their ordination, He is able to work through priests in a direct and special way.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

The Lord's Prayer reminds us once more, as we're about to receive His Son, that we are God's family. We are also reminded what it means to be family – especially in the area of forgiveness. With the eyes of faith, it's easy to see how our prayer for "daily bread" is fulfilled in the Eucharist.

### **The Sign of Peace**

Justin Martyr makes reference to the Sign of Peace in his First Apology:

*Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss.*

First Apology of Justin Martyr  
Chapter LXV – Administration of the Sacraments.

In addition, tying us to the very early Christians, the Sign of Peace serves a very necessary function in the Christian family as the author of the *Didache* attests:

*But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.*

Didache: Chapter 14 – Christian Assembly on the Lord's Day

**The Lord's Prayer reminds us once more that we are family.**

and two fish and had just walked on water. Yet the people ask for a sign that Jesus is who he says He is. Jesus doesn't point back to either of those two signs, but instead tells the crowd that He is the true bread from heaven. This is the sign that Jesus is exactly who He says He is.

**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.**

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."*

*The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me."*

John 6:51 – 57

## **II. What Happens at Mass**

If we've been to Mass recently, we can probably describe what happens at a physical level when Mass is celebrated. But there's a whole other world out there, unseen but no less real. What do we see when we look at the Mass with the eyes of faith?

**At every Mass the gulf of time and space that separates us from Heaven dissolves.**

## Heaven on Earth

When we look with the eyes of faith, we see that Mass is Heaven on earth. At every Mass the gulf of time and space that separates us from Heaven dissolves. At Mass, we open the door to Heaven, as the cosmic Christ proclaims in the Apocalypse:

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come to him and eat with him and he with Me.*

Revelation 30:20

## The Sign of the Cross

We begin each Mass by marking ourselves with the Sign of the Cross. At Baptism, Christ claimed each of us as His own. The Sign of the Cross reminds us that the Cross of Jesus has redeemed us. It also reminds us that we are part of a family, God's family. Mass is the ultimate family celebration.

## The Penitential Rite

The *Didache* or "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" was written around the year 100. It describes the penitential rite of the ancient Mass:

*But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.*

Didache: Chapter 14 – Christian Assembly on the Lord's Day

**Give thanks after having confessed your transgressions, so that your sacrifice may be pure.**

**Heaven has been joined to earth and we pray the prayer of the angels.**

*By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*

## The Eucharistic Prayer

The priest begins the Eucharistic Prayer with a command: "Lift up your hearts!" We respond, "We lift them up to the Lord." What is happening in that simple exchange? We are lifting our hearts heavenward and, through the open door between heaven and earth, are joining our hearts to God.

Suddenly the Church is filled. Heaven has been joined to earth and we pray the prayer of the angels in heaven:

*Through him the angels and all the choirs of heaven worship in awe before your presence. May our voices be one with theirs as they sing with joy the hymn of your glory:*

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might...*

Eucharistic Prayer – Weekdays II

Mass is a family affair. That includes the family of God. At the *Epiclesis*, the priest asks the Holy Spirit to bring our gift to the Father so that it may become the body and blood of the Son.

At the *Consecration*, the priest is not narrating a story. He is speaking in the person of Christ when he says:

*Take this, all of you and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you.*

there for each other. All we have to do is ask for help. That's what we do in the Prayers of the Faithful. We have full confidence that God listens to our prayers and gives us exactly what we need to draw closer to Him.

### **The Offertory**

Jesus is not the only one making a sacrifice at Mass. We are also called to make an offering. The community offers up the bread and wine that will become the body and blood of Christ. We give in our simple, limited, human way. God takes our humble gifts, blesses them, and returns them to us superabundantly. We give God bread and wine – the fruits of our labor.

But God actually desires more than our bread and wine:

*For in sacrifice you take no delight,  
burnt offering from me you would refuse;  
my sacrifice, a contrite spirit.  
A humbled, contrite heart you will not  
spurn*

Psalm 51:18 – 19

The priest, having offered to God the bread and wine, then speaks on our behalf:

*Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be  
pleased with the sacrifice we offer you  
with humble and contrite hearts.*

We offer ourselves to God. And what is the gift that God offers us in return? The answer is found in the prayer that the deacon or priest utters as he pours the water and the wine into the chalice:

**God actually  
desires more  
than our bread  
and wine.**

In the first form of the Penitential Rite, the Priest and the people together say:

*I confess to almighty God and to you, my  
brothers and sisters, that I have sinned  
through my own fault...*

The Penitential Rite prepares us for the heavenly experience that awaits us at Mass.

After confessing our sins, the priest asks God for mercy and forgiveness:

*May almighty God have mercy on us,  
forgive us our sins, and bring us to  
everlasting life.*

It is in confessing our sins and asking for God's forgiveness that we open the door to heaven, both at Mass and at other times in our lives.

### **The Gloria**

On Sundays outside of Advent and Lent, we then say or sing the Gloria. This prayer has been around since the second century and begins with the song the angels sang when Heaven touched earth on the night Jesus was born. The verses of the Gloria also recall the prayers of Heaven found in the book of Revelation. Why say these prayers now? With eyes of faith we can see that Heaven has again touched earth in this very Mass.

### **The Liturgy of the Word**

We see in Justin Martyr's defense of Christianity, that the Liturgy of the Word has been a part of Mass since at least the second century. The Liturgy of the Word involves more than the reading and exposition of God's Word. In fact, God is

**God is truly  
present to us in  
His Word.**

truly present to us in His Word. Origen, a third century scripture scholar, reminded people what was truly present in the Liturgy of the Word:

*You who are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries know, when you receive the body of the Lord, how you protect it with all caution and veneration lest any small part fall from it, lest anything of the consecrated gift be lost. For you believe, and correctly, that you are answerable if anything falls from there by neglect. But if you are so careful to preserve His body, and rightly so, how do you think that there is less guilt to have neglected God's word than to have neglected His body?*

On Exodus, 13.3

### **The Homily**

Just as in Justin Martyr's time, the homily "verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things" which we have heard in the Scriptures. By virtue of his ordination, the priest or deacon is commissioned to teach the world God's truths:

*You must apply your energies to the duty of teaching in the name of Christ, the chief Teacher. Share with all mankind the word of God you have received with joy. Meditate on the law of God, believe what you read, teach what you believe, and put into practice what you teach.*

**Teach what you believe and put into practice what you teach.**

*Let the doctrine you teach be true nourishment for the people of God. Let the example of your life attract the follower of Christ, so that by word and action you may build up the house which is God's Church.*

From the *Ordination Rite – Order of Priest*

**We are united by a common set of beliefs.**

### **The Creed**

The Mass is a family celebration. In one sense it is a family made up of 'blood' relatives. However, in this case it is the blood of Jesus that unites us. We are also united by a common set of beliefs.

Early Christians had an immense job of trying to first understand and then explain the mystery of Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they came to articulate the tenets of the Catholic faith in such a powerful way that nearly everyone could recite them from memory. Each word is precise and packed with meaning. The Nicene Creed that we proclaim every Sunday at Mass was formulated at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

It can be helpful for those struggling with their faith to reflect on each tenet of the Creed individually.

### **The Prayers of the Faithful**

It's easy to think that the God who created the universe doesn't have time to listen to our needs. Nothing could be further from the truth! In the Creed, we are united to God as family. Good families are