

# A Walk through the Mass

## An Encounter with the Risen Christ

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke (see 24:13–35) provides a great backdrop to an understanding of the Mass. In this beloved story, Jesus appears to two disheartened disciples walking out of Jerusalem on the evening of the first Easter. While walking with them, Jesus explains the Scriptures for them and how the stories and prophecies are related to the Messiah of God. Then, as they share the meal, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, at which point they recognize him as the Risen Lord, only for him to vanish from their sight. As the story ends, the two disciples run back to Jerusalem and proclaim to the others the Good News of the Resurrection. Their hearts were on fire as Jesus spoke to them about the Scriptures along the road to Emmaus. Their eyes were opened to his risen presence in the breaking of the bread.

The experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is what happens during the celebration of the Eucharist, also known as the Mass. During the celebration of the Eucharist, it is Christ who is truly present in the gathered assembly. It is Christ, the Word Made Flesh, who speaks the Scriptures to his Church, and it is Christ who is present in the bread and wine, blessed, broken, and shared. It is the Good News of the Risen Christ that we, his disciples today, are sent to proclaim to the world.

The celebration of the Eucharist is not so much an event; rather, it is an encounter with the living Christ. Each element of the celebration draws the believer more and more into the Paschal Mystery—the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ. It is helpful, now and then, to focus on this encounter in order to better understand and appreciate how each element of the liturgy leads us into ever closer relationship with the Risen Christ.

## The Eucharist in the Life of the Church

The Second Vatican Council called liturgy “the source and summit of Christian life.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 11*). It is the fountain, or source of the Church, from which grace pours out, and it is at the same time the goal, or summit, towards all of its activities are directed, and it is in liturgy where the work of redemption is accomplished (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963] 2, 10*) The liturgy, then, is the heart of the Church’s life and activity. It is through the gathering of the Church to hear the Scriptures and to share in the feast of life that its members are nourished and fed by Christ himself. Liturgy is the sharing in the very life of God; it is our encounter with the Holy One who created us, the Holy One who redeems us, and the Holy One who sustains us on our pilgrim journey through life. It is precisely because liturgy is the special place of encounter with God that it is so central to the life of the Church.

Toward the end of the first century, the evangelist Luke described in the Acts of the Apostles the importance of the gathering for the Eucharist (see 2:42). Luke tells us that the communal life of the first Christians was sustained by the teachings of the Apostles and in the breaking of the bread. Very early on, the sharing of Eucharist, in obedience to the Lord’s command at the Last Supper to “do this in memory of me,” was already developing a formalized structure. Around the year AD 150, an early Christian leader, Justin Martyr, provided a vivid picture of the liturgy of his community. Writing to the pagan Roman emperor, Justin describes the weekly gathering of the community:

On the day named after the sun, people who live in the cities and in the country gather for a celebration. Then the writings that the apostles have left or the writings of the prophets are



read, as long as time allows. After the reader finishes his task, the presider gives an address in which he urgently admonishes the people to follow these excellent teachings in their lives. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. After the end of the prayers . . . bread, wine, and water are brought and the president offers up prayers and thanksgiving—as much as he is able. The people assent by speaking “Amen.” Then the things over which thanks has been said are distributed to all who are present, and the deacons take some to those who are absent. In addition, those who are well-to-do give whatever they wish. Whatever is collected is kept by the president, who uses it to help widows and orphans.

(*First Apology*, 67)

Surprisingly, this description from the second century is essentially the order and structure of the Mass today. Though the Mass has changed and evolved through the centuries, with the addition of various elements, repetitions, prayers, and elaborate ceremonials, the essential structure has remained the tradition of the Church. The constitutive elements of the Mass outlined by Justin Martyr include (1) gathering of the people together, (2) proclamation of the Scriptures and exhortation, (3) prayer of the community, (4) gifts of bread and wine, (5) prayer of thanksgiving and people’s assent, (6) sharing of Communion, and (7) sending out to those who are sick or in need. After the renewal of the liturgy by the Second Vatican Council, which included a return from Latin to the languages of the people and a simplification of the rituals, these main elements have once again regained their prominence. In the life of the Church, this essential order of the Mass has provided the opportunity for the People of God to enter into closer communion with Christ.

## The Gathering of the Church

Justin Martyr described a Eucharistic celebration on what he calls the “day named after the sun,” which is Sunday. Sunday holds an important place for the Church, and it is on this day that the Church gathers to worship. Sunday is the first day of creation, the day when, according to Genesis, light was created out of darkness. More important for Christians, Sunday is the day of the Resurrection of Christ—each Sunday is a “little” Easter. Thus Sunday is the primary day of worship. All other Masses, which incorporate the same structure and outline, flow from the Sunday celebration and lead people to it.

As a human activity, the Mass uses elements of ritual—signs, symbols, movement, and gestures that nourish, strengthen and express faith (see *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, 20). From the building where the Church gathers to the images that surround the worshippers, from the vestments of the priest to the sacred vessels, from the words proclaimed to the meal shared, these gestures, symbols, and objects play important roles in ritual and are intended to engage the senses in the worship of the God we cannot see. This engagement is meant to foster the true, full, and active participation of all the people gathered in worship (*Sacred Liturgy*, 14). Their active participation during the Mass provides them a deep encounter with the Risen Christ.

The celebration of the Mass begins with several rites that prepare those gathered together to listen to the Word of God and to share the Eucharist. The word *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning “those called together.” The opening procession that begins the Mass is the symbolic representation of the gathering of people who have been called together by God.

When time has come to begin the Mass, the assembly stands and usually a chants or sings as the procession begins and the priest and ministers take their place. The entrance procession and the singing



that accompanies it are meant to unify the hearts and minds of the participants so they are prepared for prayer.

When he reaches the altar, the priest (along with any concelebrants and deacons) reverences the altar with a bow and a kiss. On more solemn occasions, the priest may incense the altar. These acts of veneration remind us that the altar is the symbol of Christ. It is from this altar that Christ, the true host of the banquet and the true sacrificed lamb, feeds his People.

The assembly, the assisting ministers, and the priest begin by making the Sign of the Cross. Through this gesture, the Church gathers in the name of the Holy Trinity. The ritual words of greeting that follow the Sign of the Cross recognize the presence of Christ in the gathering. The text of the greeting is taken from the letters of Paul to the churches (see 2 Corinthians 13:13, Romans 1:7, Ephesians 1:2). On Sundays, especially during the Easter Season, the rite of blessing and sprinkling of holy water may take place to remind the assembly of their baptismal dignity as the sons and daughters of God. At other times the Penitential Rite follows the Sign of the Cross and greeting.

Through the Penitential Rite, the assembly recognizes their need to come before God with honest and repentant hearts and to seek God's mercy and strength. One way to recognize our sinfulness is to say together the *Confiteor* ("I confess to almighty God . . ."). Another is to pray a litany praising Christ ("Lord, have mercy" or in Greek "*Kyrie eleison*"). The litany is usually sung, chanted, or recited together by the assembly.

On Sundays, major holy days, and feasts (except during Advent and Lent) the *Gloria* is sung after the Penitential Rite. This ancient song of praise begins with the words of the angels' announcing to the shepherds the birth of Christ: "Glory to God in the highest / and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). This song of praise proclaims the glory, goodness, and majesty of the Trinity.

After the *Gloria* the priest invites the assembly to pray briefly in silence. The Opening Prayer that follows, also known as the "Collect" because it collects all the prayers of the assembly into one, expresses the special character or focus of that particular Mass. The Opening Prayer may allude to the readings of the Mass or to the feast day. The people respond "Amen" as a way of joining their prayers into one. After this all are seated. The Collect brings to a close the introductory rites and begins the first of the two major parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word.

## Formed by the Word of God

With hearts and minds prepared for the celebration, the assembly sits and listens to the Word of God. Justin Martyr tells us that the writings of the Apostles and the prophets are read during the celebration of the Eucharist. These writings in time became known as the Gospels, the epistles of New Testament, and the stories of the Old Testament. The Liturgy of the Word has its roots in the synagogue tradition where the Scriptures were proclaimed and commented on. This Jewish ritual practice was adopted by the early Church.

During the Liturgy of the Word, Jesus Christ the Word of God Made Flesh, feeds and nourishes his Church. Through the Scriptures proclaimed, Christ teaches, admonishes, comforts, challenges, and sanctifies the People of God, opening them up to the mystery of salvation. In the words of the Scriptures, in the chants and songs between them, through the homily and the prayers of the people, Christ and his People come together.

There are typically four Scripture passages proclaimed during the Mass. The first reading is taken from the Old Testament. This reading is usually from one of the prophetic books or the stories of our Israelite ancestors in faith. Another selection is taken from the Book of Psalms. This Scripture passage



from the Psalms is usually chanted or sung responsorially—that is, sung between the cantor and the assembly.

After these two selections from the Old Testament, there is a reading from the New Testament, primarily from the epistles of Saint Paul or the other letters. After a few moments of silence, the assembly rises and sings an acclamation to greet the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Gospel. This chant or song is the Alleluia, taken from the Hebrew word meaning “praise God.” (During Lent another acclamation of praise is sung in place of the Alleluia.) The singing of the Alleluia accompanies the procession of the Book of the Gospels to the ambo, or pulpit. On more solemn occasions, this procession may include the use of candles and incense. After the Gospel proclamation, the people sit once again and the priest delivers a homily, which exhorts and encourages the assembly to follow the teachings of the Scriptures in today’s world.

On Sundays, Solemnities, and other major occasions the assembly stands and recites the Creed, or the profession of faith, after the homily. The Nicene Creed, or the shorter Apostles’ Creed, is recited by all as a symbolic act of belief in, as well as a response to, the mysteries proclaimed in the Scriptures. After the recitation of the Creed, the Assembly raises its voice in prayer to God for the needs of the world and the Church. Through these Prayers of the Faithful, also known as the general intercessions, the assembly exercises its baptismal priesthood by offering up prayers to God. These prayers are typically general, although a few may be specific to the needs of the particular community. Prayers for the Church, the world, those in need, those burdened by difficulties, the sick, and the deceased are offered to God. The prayers are introduced by the priest, read by the reader, and the people respond in one voice with a common response, usually by saying, “Lord, hear our prayer.” Having listened to the Word of God and having been exhorted to follow their example, the Prayers of the Faithful conclude the first part of the Mass with prayers for all, placing our trust and confidence in the love of God, who provides for all our needs.

## Preparing the Table of the Lord

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the preparation of the Altar and the presentation of the gifts. Following an ancient tradition going back to Justin Martyr’s time, members of the assembly bring forward bread and wine to be used for Eucharist. Along with these gifts, money and offerings for the poor and needy, as well as for the work of the Church, are also collected and presented. On more solemn celebrations, these gifts along with the priest, ministers, and the assembly are incensed. The use of incense here and in other parts of the liturgy is an ancient ritual of offering. As the smoke rises, the prayers of the people also rise up to God (see Psalm 141).

The use of bread and wine at the Mass also has roots in the Jewish rituals adopted and adapted by the early Christians. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine, the main elements used for the Passover ritual meal. It was during this supper that Jesus proclaimed the bread as his Body and the wine as his Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting Covenant. During the weekly celebration of the Jewish Sabbath, loaves of bread and cups of wine were blessed and shared. In the Emmaus story, it is through the breaking of the bread that the disciple recognized the Risen Christ. The phrase “Breaking of the Bread” used by the early Christians becomes one of the earliest titles for the celebration of Eucharist.

The gifts of bread and wine are prepared on the altar. The priest then mixes a small amount of water with the wine, symbolizing the dual nature of Christ, who by the sharing of our humanity gives us a share in his divinity. When the gifts are ready, the priest washes his hands as a sign of interior preparation to come before the Lord with a purified heart. When these preparatory rites are concluded, the priest and assembly ready themselves for the central act of the liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer.



## The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

The term *eucharist* comes from the Greek word for *thanksgiving*. The Eucharistic Prayer is the great prayer of thanksgiving of the Church to God for the death and Resurrection of Christ, which is called the Paschal Mystery. This prayer, given voice by the priest in the name of the Church, gives thanks and praise to God for Christ. It is during the prayer that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharistic Prayer also comes from Jewish ritual prayers of thanksgiving and blessing used in the home and in the synagogue.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a dialogue between the priest and assembly, asking them to lift up their hearts in thanks and praise to the Lord. Then the great prayer continues and recalls the wonders God has done for humanity and through all of creation. This first section of the Eucharistic Prayer concludes with an acclamation of the priest and assembly joining the song of the angels and saints in praise of God (Holy, Holy, Holy).

The second section of the great prayer includes the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Greek term *epiclesis* describes this act of invocation of the Holy Spirit over the gifts of bread and wine. Then as the Eucharistic Prayer continues, the sacred words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper are recalled: "Take this all of you and eat it. This is my body. . . . Take this all of you and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood. . . . Do this in memory of me." By doing what the Lord commands and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, the true and living presence of Christ for the life of the world. This great mystery of salvation is acclaimed by the assembly as all sing or say one of the memorial acclamations: "Lord by your cross and Resurrection you have set us free, you are the savior of the world" or "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

The Eucharistic Prayer continues by remembering Christ's Passion, his Resurrection, and his Ascension into glory as the Church awaits his return. Remembering these mysteries, the great prayer continues so that through this Eucharist, all may be made one in Christ. Then the prayer turns to the needs of the Church throughout all times and places, for the Pope, the bishops, and ministers of the Gospel, and then particularly that those who have died may share eternal life with Mary, the Mother of God, the saints, and all God's faithful People.

The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with a doxology, or statement of praise, that gives honor and glory to God through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. After this doxology the people give their assent to the great prayer by singing "Amen," which seals and affirms the prayer.

During the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church does precisely what Jesus did on the night of the Last Supper and what he did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Through this great prayer, Jesus himself once again takes the bread, blesses God, breaks it, and shares it. And through the offering of praise and thanksgiving and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we recognize him once again in our midst.

## Nourished at the Table of the Lord

After the Eucharistic Prayer, the assembly prepares to share the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion through two important acts: the Lord's Prayer and the sign of peace. By reciting together the prayer that Jesus himself taught us, the assembly is reminded that God provides the daily bread of our lives, principally the Eucharist, and that just as we are forgiven, we too must forgive others. The sharing of the sign of peace reminds us that peace is the gift of Christ and that the unity of God's Kingdom is what we long to share in Communion. The handshake, embrace, or kiss of peace shows forth the unity and peace that Christ promises to his followers. It also points to the day when all people will sit together in lasting



peace. Following the sign of peace is the practical act of breaking the bread and placing it into various vessels for the distribution of Communion. The litany that accompanies this action, “Lamb of God,” is sung or recited by all.

The priest then holds the Eucharist before the people and invites them to share in the banquet of the Lord. The people respond to this invitation with a prayer of humility, recognizing that no one is truly worthy to receive Christ (see Luke 7:6–7). By this act, we recognize that grace and the Eucharist are free gifts from God. No one has earned these mysteries as a reward; rather Christ freely pours himself out for us and for our salvation. The priest and people then prepare their hearts and minds to receive Communion. A chant or song begins as people come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ from the priest or another minister. By singing the Communion song together, the hearts, minds, and voices of the people are united as they come forward to be nourished at the table of Christ who gives us his very own Body and Blood as a feast and sacrifice.

After Communion the assembly takes a few moments of silence for meditation on the sacred mysteries they have just shared and for silent prayer. After this time of silence, a hymn of praise may also be sung. The priest then invites the assembly to pray. This Closing Prayer brings an end to the Communion Rite. This purpose of this prayer is to ask for the fulfillment of the promises made through the sharing of Communion, namely growing closer to Christ. As with the Opening Prayer, the Closing Prayer is meant to collect the prayers of the assembly together.

## Go Forth to Love and Serve the Lord

The concluding rites prepare the assembly to go forth from the celebration of the Eucharist as faithful disciples. At this point brief announcements for the good of the community may be made. The priest then prays a blessing over the assembly and, once again, all make the Sign of the Cross. The priest (or deacon) dismisses the assembly to go forth to do good works for others and to praise God with their lives. The priest kisses the altar; reverences it with a bow, along with the other ministers; and processes out. As the entrance procession symbolized the gathering of the Church, this procession now symbolizes the sending forth of the assembly to be disciples in the world.

Like the disciples who ran from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the others of their encounter with the Risen Christ, so too do the people leave Mass as witnesses to the presence of Christ. Inspired by the Word of God and nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church can fulfill its duty to be light for the world, instruments of peace, and the living presence of Christ for the world.

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