

# THE RITE OF MASS

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1322 – 1419)*

## Introduction

The structure of the Mass has been carefully designed: each element has a particular significance and role to play. Before going further, I should stress that the Mass can only be understood in terms of a two-way gift - and both sides of the giving are expressed in the Liturgy of the Mass:

1. God's gift to us - the Mass is the most concentrated and effective of the means used by the Father to give us grace, holiness and his very own life. Nothing compares to the depth and richness of the Mass because here, the Father gives us his Son, Jesus Christ under the forms of bread and wine. For this reason, the sacrament is sometimes called the "Sacrament of sacraments". *"We offer to you his Body and Blood, the acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world." (Eucharistic Prayer 4)*
2. Our gift to God - at the same time, the Mass is also a sacrifice (i.e., something offered by mankind to the Father). In the Mass, we are allowed to join with Christ as he offers to the Father the gift of his passion on Calvary and his resurrection for the salvation of all mankind. We give to the Father the life of his only Son. In addition, we give to the Father all those who, through Baptism, are in Christ: we give to God the whole Christ ("*totus Christus*") meaning both head (Jesus Christ) and members (the baptised, the Body of Christ). We ask that as the Father accepts Christ as a perfect offering, he may accept us too, who are inseparably joined to Christ. So the Mass is an act of self-giving to the Father - we are not simply receiving (i.e., passive) but also actively giving (i.e., we need to take an active and deliberate participation in the Liturgy as it unfolds). *"May he (Christ) make us an everlasting gift to you (Father)" Eucharistic Prayer 3.*

The central action of the Mass revolves around the Liturgies of the Word and of the Eucharist. In the past theologians would speak of the two altars of a Church - the 'altar' of the Word (meaning the ambo or lectern, from which the readings from Sacred Scripture would be proclaimed) and the altar of Sacrifice. This idea is only rarely spoken of today. Although it was trying to make a good point (that Christ present in the Scriptures was the same Christ who is present in Holy Communion - so in a sense the lectern is very similar to the altar because from here Christ is offered to the people for them to be nourished on him), nevertheless, it is bizarre language - the lectern looks nothing like an altar and in any case an altar is for sacrifice only, and we are not offering Christ in sacrifice from the lectern in the readings! In addition, we do not exactly equate Christ's presence in the Word of the Scriptures with his presence in Holy Communion: there is a completeness and sublimity to the presence of Christ in

Holy Communion which is not matched anywhere else - even in the Sacred Scriptures. In this form he is substantially present. SO, instead of the "two altars" language, today there is a greater emphasis on the profound unity between the readings and Holy Communion - the same Christ is offered to us, only in two very different ways. For this reason, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist form the twin axes of the Mass. Around them are fitted the preparatory and concluding rites: Greeting, Penitential, Communion and dismissal. This structure is the same today as it has been since the time of the Apostles. Records that have survived from the first century and continuously until today show that this structure has been the form of the Mass from the very beginning.

Let me give you an example, taken from the Apologia of St. Justin the Martyr, written about 150 AD. He describes the basic structure of the Mass as follows:

<b>Rome in the time of St. Justin (c 150 A.D.)</b>	<b>The structure of Mass today</b>
<p><i>“On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place.”</i> The faithful meet together on the day of the Lord’s resurrection – Sunday, the first day of the week.</p>	Sunday Mass
<p><i>“The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits.”</i> The memoirs of the apostles (i.e., the Gospels and letters of St. Paul) together with the writings of the Prophets (i.e., the Old testament) are read aloud.</p>	1 <sup>st</sup> Reading (Old Testament) 2 <sup>nd</sup> Reading and Gospel (New Testament)
<p><i>“When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things.”</i> After this, the Priest explains the meaning of the texts and encourages the people to remain faithful.</p>	The Homily
<p><i>“Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves... and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.”</i></p>	The Prayers of the Faithful
<p><i>“When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss.”</i> i.e., so that all bitterness between members may be ended before the offering of the sacrifice.</p>	The Sign of Peace
<p><i>“Those who are well off, and who are also willing, give as each chooses. What is gathered is given to him who presides to assist orphans and widows, those whom illness or any other cause has deprived of resources, prisoners, immigrants and, in a word, all who are in need.”</i> A collection is taken of goods or money and handed over to the Priest for him to distribute to the poor and the needy of the community.</p>	The collection
<p><i>“Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren.”</i></p>	The Offertory

<p><i>He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks (in Greek: eucharistian) that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen.'</i></p>	<p>The Eucharistic Prayer and Great Amen</p>
<p><i>“When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the "eucharisted" bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.</i>  The deacons then distribute Holy Communion to all present and take it to the sick and imprisoned.</p>	<p>Holy Communion for those present, and taken to the sick, housebound and imprisoned.</p>

Stunningly similar, aren't they? No wonder: the template of the Mass has not changed since the time of the Apostles.

## The Structure of the Mass

The Mass is made up of five main sections

1. Introductory Rites (*Greeting, Penitential Rite, Gloria*)
2. **Liturgy of the Word** (*1st & 2nd Reading, Gospel, Homily, Creed, Intercessions*)
3. **Liturgy of the Eucharist** (*Offertory, Eucharistic Prayer*)
4. Communion Rite (*Our Father, Sign of Peace, Lamb of God, Holy Communion*)
5. Rite of Blessing and Dismissal (*Blessing and solemn dismissal*)

Of these five sections, the most important and the longest are the **Liturgy of the Word** and the **Liturgy of the Eucharist** - these contain the very essence of the Mass, which is the encounter with the Living and Risen Christ through His Word and through offering the sacrifice of Calvary in an unbloody and sacramental way. The other sections are much shorter and prepare us for or flow from the Liturgies of Word and Eucharist, the two great pillars of the Mass.

### (1) THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

The procession of the servers and the Priest is an important part of the Liturgy – he represents Christ as the sacrificing priest on Calvary. Procession is an ancient liturgical action that expresses the solemnity and importance of the action you are about to perform: thus, the ancient Jews would process on great festivals to their places of prayer. In the procession, Christ the High Priest walks among his people in the unworthy person of the priest He has chosen.

## **Greeting**

The priest greets the assembled Church in a statement of faith and a prayer for God to come close to his people - "*In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*" Communion and the Mass are a celebration of the gathered community of faith. Receiving Holy Communion means that we are choosing to be a member of that community - thus it is essential that we do not celebrate the day of the Resurrection individually, walking through the hills or in our own rooms, but as the visible Body of Christ, assembled to receive the Lord.

## **Penitential Rite**

Christ's first recorded preaching was "*Repent and believe in the Gospel*" (Mk. 1:15). Every encounter with Christ in the Gospel begins with the recognition of the need to repent and amend life. We are no different: we are about to encounter the Risen Lord in the most intimate way possible: we acknowledge past failings and separate ourselves from them, requesting the merciful grace of our loving God. Note – the "I confess" is a hugely old formula, reminiscent of public confession as practised in the early Church as we confess here to God himself, to "you, my brothers and sisters" and request the prayers of the Church on earth, Our Lady, the angels and saints to assist us in turning our lives back to God.

## **Gloria**

A short hymn of thanks, praise and triumph for the redemption we have received. In a burst of joy inspired by a deep appreciation of our faith, we praise and glorify Jesus Christ who has taken away our guilt. Because it is so explicitly joyful, it is omitted in penitential seasons (Lent/Advent).

## **Opening Prayer**

This is the Collect: the people are invited to quiet prayer for their intentions, for the graces necessary for the celebration of the Mass. After the silence, the Priest 'collects' and summarises their intentions with the opening prayer. The Opening Prayers have a common structure: they are addressed to the Father, recall a moment in the history of our salvation and make a request in the name of our Lord and in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

## **(2) THE LITURGY OF THE WORD**

Hearing the Word of God prepares our souls to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. Just as on the road to Emmaus the two disciples were prepared by Christ for the meal they would share by listening to him as he explained the Old Testament to them, and their hearts "*burned within them*", so too our hearts need to be set afire with love and anticipation before we receive him in Holy Communion. The readings we hear on Sundays are on a 3-year cycle - Year A runs through St. Matthew's Gospel, Year B is St. Mark's and Year C is St. Luke's (St. John's Gospel is read in the summer months each year). Every three years the Church reads practically the whole of Sacred

Scripture at Mass. We are expected to read the readings before the Sunday Mass - it is almost impossible to make much of so much Scripture, a great deal of which is difficult to penetrate at first sight, if we come to it on the Sunday without prior preparation.

### **First Reading**

From the Old Testament, except in the seven weeks after Easter when the First Reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles. We are so far from Old Testament society, history and concepts that often these readings are difficult to follow. To avoid them becoming a rather meaningless and monotonous trudge through the Old Testament we will have to do some preparation. On Sundays there is almost always a connection between the First Reading and the Gospel: sometimes fairly obvious, the links can be obscure - they will need a little thought, prayer and even a little study.

### **Psalm**

There are 150 psalms in the Old Testament, as well as a number of 'canticles' - pieces of poetry included in prose books of the Old and New Testaments (such as the Magnificat of our Lady). The psalms themselves are almost certainly the inspired hymns that the Jews used in their worship in the Temple in Jerusalem while the sacrifices were being offered. The psalms have been the backbone of daily Christian prayer since the time of Christ: they are in turn mystical, reflective, triumphant, and repentant.

### **Second Reading**

The second reading is taken from one of the letters of the New Testament - these are the reflections of the Apostles on the life and teaching of Christ. They apply the example and person of Christ to the everyday life of Christian disciples and so are deeply significant to us. Most of the letters were written by St. Paul who was no believer in 'dumbing down'! It is often tempting to give up trying to uncover the meaning of these letters because they aren't immediately obvious: but we should remember that no relationship flowers if we expect to understand the other party on the first meeting. We need patience and perseverance if we seek to know the infinite God. Remember also that these are letters - they don't break down naturally into chapters and short passages for reading aloud: so what we are given one Sunday almost certainly was not intended to stand on its own but to be taken with what we heard the previous Sunday - one thought of St. Paul's will often occupy us for several weekends. If we don't bear this in mind, we stand no chance at all of grasping what he was trying to put across. If you have any desire to understand what the Epistle teaches us, we will have to do some preparation of the reading beforehand!

### **Gospel Acclamation**

Except in Lent, this begins with the acclamation "Alleluia" - a cry of joy meaning 'Praise to God' in Hebrew. It reflects the joy of the faithful in preparing to receive the Word of Life in the Gospel. We stand at this point in order to hear the voice and teaching of Christ himself.

## **Gospel**

The climax of the Liturgy of the Word: the Gospel is called the Book of Life for it contains the very heart of the message of salvation: the events and sayings of the Saviour which have redeemed the world. The rituals which surround the proclamation of the Gospel demonstrate its importance: acolytes carry candles each side of the lectern (as a reminder that we listen to the voice of the Light of the World), if there are enough servers, one will carry a thurible so that the Book of the Gospels may be incensed (as indeed we incense all images of the presence of Christ - the altar, the gifts of bread and wine, the priest and people). When the Gospel is announced ("A reading from the Holy Gospel according to...") we make a three-fold gesture of faith and self-consecration - with the thumb of the right hand we trace the cross on our own forehead, mouth and then chest. This is an ancient liturgical action that visually signs the prayer *"May Christ, whose words we are to hear, be in my head and in my thinking, on my lips and in my speaking, in my heart and in my feeling."* This prayer emphasises the true heart of the disciple of Christ – eager to hear the Word of Life, we prepare by resolving to absorb Christ's teaching so fully that it is imprinted on thoughts, words & feelings and becomes the defining characteristic of our actions and our lives.

## **Homily**

The purpose of the homily is 4-fold:

1. to explain the meaning of the Scriptures that have been read,
2. to clarify for us how the Church has understood them through the centuries,
3. to apply them to life today
4. to encourage the faithful to live according to the teaching they contain.

All this in a matter of minutes! It is important to remember that the homily is not an optional part of the Sunday Mass - the clergy are obliged to preach because without it, there would be no teaching on the reading, no commentary on the Word of God and for nearly all the parish almost no instruction in the Faith at all. Note also that the homily is more than a homely talk for the amusement of the people or a fireside chat during which we are free to read the newsletter or catch up on last night's lost sleep. It is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word. If you are keen to have more instruction in the Faith as an adult, the first place to which you should turn is the homily.

## **Creed**

This is as much a prayer as a statement of faith. It is the most succinct and compact summary of the entire Gospel that you will find. In response to the Readings and the Homily, the faithful of Christ rise and proclaim to God and to the world that they believe - "We believe in one God ... " It is a powerful declaration before God himself of our resolution to live out the teachings we have heard, and it dramatically affirms our unity - we are one family which draws its unity from the singleness of our faith. We believe the same truths about God and each week submit ourselves to them. We are accepting the teachings of the Catholic Church in their entirety as being truths revealed to us by God himself through the Church.

## Prayers of the Faithful

These prayers have this name because in the early Church it was only the baptised who were permitted to stay for this part of the Mass: those receiving instruction all left the Church after the homily and Creed, leaving only the baptised 'faithful' to remain for the 'sacred mysteries' of the Consecration and Holy Communion. They have a structure which should be evident when they are announced - for the Church, then for public authorities and the salvation of the world, then for those oppressed by any need and finally for the local community. They are not intended to be a sort of news-bulletin of the most recent tragedies, nor at the other extreme should they simply ignore the current needs of the local or international community - some form of balance needs to be retained. The intentions read out are just that - they should be statements of a particular need after which there is a moment of quiet prayer for the people of offer their own silent prayer for the intention specified, after which the priest concludes the prayer with "Lord, in your mercy" to which we add "hear our prayer". They should not be long prayers addressed to God himself (of the sort "Heavenly Father, we pray today for Louise who is suffering from back-pains and who is very low at the moment. We ask you, Lord, to be with her and her family through this difficult time") but simple statements of needs for prayer ("For the sick, especially Louise and her family, and all the housebound"). These prayers are intended to flow from the issues raised in the readings and homily - like the Creed, they are the people's response in faith to the teachings they have received.

## (3) LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

At this point, the Mass changes dramatically. Up until now, the flow has been from priest and reader to people: the emphasis has been on instruction and assent. The people are being addressed in the Liturgy of the Word by the authoritative voice of Christ in the Sacred Scriptures and through the teaching of the Church (in the person of the priest). Now there is a change of direction: the Liturgy of the Eucharist is about the people of God addressing God himself. From here, the priest is no longer speaking to the people and therefore representing God. Now, he is speaking to God the Father on behalf of the people and representing Jesus Christ the High Priest as well as representing them. Before the Vatican Council, this change of emphasis was very obvious, because the priest faced towards the individuals to whom he was speaking. In the Liturgy of the Word (the Gospel, homily etc.) he faced the people - but when the Liturgy of the Eucharist began, he turned around. No longer was he addressing them, he was addressing God - and doing so as the representative of the people, so rather like a negotiator sent out to parley with the opposing army on a battlefield, he goes in front of the people he represents, with his people gathered behind him, summarised and symbolised in the lone figure in the front. If, in the Liturgy of the Word, the priest is in the role of teacher and authority, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, he is in the role of go-between. Whereas in the Liturgy of the Word, the people are essentially passive and receptive (listening and responding in faith to what they hear), in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest joins with them in a dynamic action of worship - now he is not so much speaking *to them on behalf of God* as speaking *to God on behalf of them*. Today, the priest does not turn around (i.e., to face in the same direction the people are facing), so we may not realise that he is no longer addressing the people any more but God himself. Nevertheless, the people are actively involved

in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, because what is offered to God is also *their* sacrifice and with the sacrifice (Jesus Christ himself) they offer their own lives.

There are two main parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist - the Preparation of the Gifts and the Eucharistic Prayer. The first includes the collection, the procession of the gifts to the altar and the prayers of dedication, in which the priest sets apart the gifts of bread and wine and dedicates them to God. The second is the climax of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and indeed the climax of the entire Mass - the consecratory Eucharistic Prayer which gives the Mass the character of a sacrifice.

### **Collection and Procession of the Gifts**

There is a moment of silence after the Intercessions - it may seem like an interlude as the collection is being taken, but this silence has at least since the time of St. Justin (c. 150) been regarded as an important part of the Mass. This silence is necessary for us to make the adjustment for the Liturgy of the Eucharist: fortified and encouraged by the Word, we prepare for the climax of the Mass – the offering to the Father of the very life and redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity. We are about to encounter the Risen Lord as truly and real-ly as St. John encountered him on the Island of Patmos at the start of the Book of Revelation: when he sees the glorified Christ in the flesh, he collapses at his feet, overcome with love, awe, unworthiness. We prepare to offer the Father the only thing that is worthy to be given to him - Jesus Christ in his divine glory and holiness - and to join to that gift our own contribution, namely our own unworthy and fallen lives. The magnitude of what we are about to do should lead us to savour these moments of silence and use them to prepare ourselves.

The Collection and Procession of the Gifts may seem rather worldly in the middle of this sacred action of the Mass, but are integral to it. Our love of God is shown in our love of each other: we contribute from our own possessions for the upkeep of the community. In the Church's early years, the money or gifts in kind were given to the priest to be distributed to the poor. Today this is still done: your collection does not go into his pocket but into parish funds to pay for what the community needs - bread and wine for Mass, heating for the church, gifts to local & international charities, food to the poor who come to the presbytery door, expenses of running the parish etc.

The Procession of Gifts is retained from the days when the bread and wine for Mass was brought to the Church by the people as their contribution to the Mass. Today, these are bought in advance and stored in the sacristy - yet the meaning of the procession is important: the priest consecrates what the people provide for him - it is their sacrifice, offered for them and for them to receive.

### **Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts**

The altar is prepared for sacrifice with the missal and sacred vessels (chalices and ciboria) placed ready for the offering of the sacrifice. The prayers of preparation ("*Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread/wine to offer etc.*") were taken from the Jewish rite of Passover where they are a form of grace before the meal.



However, two other prayers used at the time are particularly important. When the deacon prepares the chalice with wine, he adds a few drops of water and inaudibly offers this prayer:

- *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 prayer makes a complicated point very simple: we are about to share in the mystery of the Last Supper and receive the Body and Blood of Our Lord. We are going to receive Jesus' divine life, his divinity through this sacrament. It is very similar to Christ's incarnation, when he took our human nature to himself. In both cases, by the work of Christ, human meets divine and is wholly submerged in it. *That's* what we do in the Mass, sinking our human nature in Christ's divine life.

The second prayer is said inaudibly by the priest after he has said the two prayers of preparation, over ciborium and chalice. He bows in prayer before the altar and says quietly:

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

This is another masterpiece of brevity, which really encapsulates the whole essence of the Mass. First, the Mass is a prayer addressed to God, rather than a service addressed to the people. Second, it is a sacrifice, the giving of Christ to the Father as he gave himself to the Father for us all on the cross. Third, together with the offering of Christ to the Father we offer our own sacrifice - ourselves. Fourth; the offering is the fulfilment of Psalm 50 *"my sacrifice, a contrite spirit; a humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn."*

After this, the priest washes his hands - a necessary preparation before he handles the very Body and Blood of Our Lord but which also symbolises the washing of Baptism in which we are cleansed of our sins. This is alluded to in the prayer he offers quietly while washing his fingers (*"Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me from my sins."*)

## **Eucharistic Prayer**

Now the Eucharistic Prayer begins, the climax of the Mass. In it we join ourselves to Christ offering his life on the cross so that, with him, we offer to the Father the spotless and innocent life of the Lamb of God. For that to be true, Christ's offering (his own life, his Body and Blood) must be actually present. The Paschal action, which redeemed the world, namely Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension are entered into by the people present through the ritual of the Liturgy in which we take part. The whole prayer is offered to the Father - during it, the Son will be made present under the forms of bread and wine, and this will be achieved through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is truly trinitarian in nature for it involves all three persons in their own distinctive way.

There are eight parts to the Eucharistic Prayer:

1. Preface
2. Acclamation ("Holy, holy")
3. Epiclesis
4. Institution narrative and Consecration
5. Anamnesis
6. Offering
7. Intercession
8. Final doxology and Great Amen

Invitation to Prayer: *"Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father"* - there is much here. The people are invited to enter into the offering of the sacrifice as it is *their sacrifice*. In addition, they accept that the priest is acting on their behalf and that it is through him that the gifts are offered to God - it is his sacrifice. Their reply makes this clear - they pray that the sacrifice, which the priest is about to offer, be acceptable to God and effective for the salvation of all God's people, living and dead.

- Introductory Dialogue, Preface and Holy, Holy (1) & (2): the dialogue between Priest and People is very ancient and makes it clear what the People are offering - *"Lift up your hearts."* The Preface is one of the oldest set texts of the Mass - there are 81 in the missal, to be chosen according to the season, feast day or occasion. Some feasts have their own preface, but usually there are a number that the priest may choose from, preferably to reflect the theme of the readings or his homily. They state, in highly condensed form, the living faith of the Church (e.g., the Preface of the Immaculate Conception or the Preface of Pastors). They are addressed to the Father & state the particular reason for our need to give him thanks and praise (in Greek 'eucharistein' - from which we get the word Eucharist, the great prayer of giving thanks). This is the thanksgiving element of the Eucharistic Prayer. Prefaces end with a reference to the angels who perpetually sing God's praises in heaven - this is important because what we are about to do is take part, on earth, in the eternal liturgy of heaven, in which Christ gives his sacrificed life to the Father, in an act of love for all time. Thus, we echo and take up the words of praise which Isaiah hears the angels of God singing when he sees heaven thrown open (*Is. 6:3 - "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts. His glory fills the whole earth."* echoed in *Rev. 4:8 - "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."*). We should see the action of the Mass as a heavenly action, the angelic liturgy of the Kingdom transposed to earth, our human participation in something infinitely greater than we could invent or cobble together. God is about to manifest himself in our midst, and almost in preparation, the angels gather with us to sing his glory and wonder at this act of humility on the part of the infinite and omnipotent God. This is the acclamation of the Eucharistic Prayer.
- The Epiclesis (3): this is a Greek word which means the 'calling down'. It refers to the moment when the priest holds his hands out over the gifts of bread and wine and invokes the Holy Spirit, calling him to come down to sanctify the gifts and turn them into the Body and Blood of our Saviour. *"Father, may this Holy Spirit sanctify these offerings. Let them become the Body ✠ and Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord."* (*Fourth Eucharistic Prayer*). It

is by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ becomes truly present under the appearance of bread and wine - as the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus Christ within her through the hovering presence of the Holy Spirit ("*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow*" Lk. 1:35), so it is by invoking the Holy Spirit that the gifts are transformed into the very presence of the same Christ.

- Institution narrative and Consecration (4): at the heart of the four Eucharistic Prayers is the account of the Last Supper and the solemn carrying out of our Lord's command "*Do this in memory of me.*" The words of Christ at the Last Supper turned the bread and wine into his own Body and Blood by a miracle - when a priest, ordained to act in the person of Christ, during the Mass proclaims these words of Christ, it is Christ who speaks and so the words are effective: the bread is transformed into Jesus Christ, as is the wine. There is no longer any more bread or wine left - all is changed into Christ himself. The appearance remains the same, as it did at the Last Supper, but the actual thing being given is no longer bread or wine at all, only the Body and Blood of Christ. For this reason, the priest genuflects immediately after he has consecrated the hosts and then the chalice - we do so because this is no longer bread and wine but Christ himself, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, entire and whole, risen and glorified. It is critical to remember that these words are not repeated by the priest simply as a story-teller repeats a story - he speaks more in the manner of an ambassador speaking for his government so that when he states that his government is at war, so it becomes so. His words are effective and cause the change to occur. In the same way, the words of Christ at the Last Supper, when said in Mass by an ordained priest, are effective in transforming the gifts into the true, real, substantial and sacramental presence of Christ.
- Anamnesis (5): this literally means 'commemoration' in Greek, but its weight is far greater in Greek and Hebrew than in English. It sounds like simple memory - we commemorate anniversaries or significant dates like 11 November as Armistice Day by remembering the events that we feel should not be forgotten. That is memory - but not what the Church means by 'commemoration'. We solemnly recall the essential acts of our salvation (Jesus Christ's death on the cross, his Resurrection and Ascension into heaven) and believe that by doing so in the Mass, we are actually entering into those actions and therefore benefiting from them in the here and now. They become present realities, even though they are past events. Jews are perfectly comfortable with this idea because it is central to the Passover: each year they kill and eat a lamb in memorial of the first Passover when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. Each year, that event becomes present reality - in the set liturgy of the Passover, the father of the family must retell the story of the plagues, especially the death of the first-born and the journey through the Red Sea, and the words he is given keep referring to "this night" when these events happened. They are not being duplicated in the present, and happening all over again but are being experienced in the present, as if there was no distinction any more between present and past - as indeed there is not in the eyes of God! In other words, by this action of liturgical remembering, we are present at the hill of Calvary, in the garden of the Resurrection and on the mount of the Ascension - all these events are present and real to us, so that their power and

healing grace can be received by us. *"Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ, your Son. We, your people and your ministers, recall his passion, his resurrection from the dead and his Ascension into glory."* (First Eucharistic Prayer)

- Offering (6): now that Christ's Body and Blood are truly present on our altar, the sacrifice is ready to be offered. It is in the offering of the spotless Lamb to the Father that we are redeemed by Christ's self-sacrifice. Thus, *"Looking forward to his coming in glory, we offer you his Body and Blood, the acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world."* (Fourth Eucharistic Prayer). Since Christ died not just for an example for us to follow but as a gift to his Father to substitute for us and so win us salvation, so, when we commemorate his death and rising, we are taking part, with Christ, in these saving actions - so it is important and necessary for us actively to co-operate with Christ in giving the sacrifice of his own life to the Father.
- Intercession (7): within the Eucharistic Prayers are specific intercessions that relate directly to the sacrifice we are offering. There are prayers in all of them for the following - the whole Church (because the Mass is an action of the whole Church, it is the action which binds us to our Head, Jesus Christ - this is referred to in the specific mention of two important names which demonstrate the unity of our parish with the whole Church, namely the local bishop and the universal pastor and visible head of the Church on earth: the Holy Father - and is offered in union with the Church in heaven, hence the mention of Our Lady and the saints); for the parish community (they are the faithful present in that area - *"Have mercy on us all; make us worthy to share eternal life"* Second Eucharistic Prayer); all the living (the death of our Lord was offered *"for you and for all"* - so the Church offers the Mass which is the made-present of the death of the Lord for all the living *"Remember those who take part in this offering, all your people and all who seek you with a sincere heart."* Fourth Eucharistic Prayer); also for all the dead (since Christ died to redeem all humanity, living and dead and so the Church deliberately and consciously applies the merits of his Passion and Resurrection to all those who have died).
- Final Doxology & Great Amen (8): the final acclamation of praise to the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The miracle is complete - by the will of the Father and the presence of the Holy Spirit, our Saviour Jesus Christ is visibly and substantially present for our adoration and salvation.

#### **(4) THE RITE OF COMMUNION**

The sacrifice has been offered. Now the Church enters the specific rite that prepares us to receive Holy Communion. Having given the gifts, which are now transformed into Jesus Christ himself, to our heavenly Father, he gives them to us a spiritual food for our souls, so that we may be united body soul and complete humanity to the fullness of God's presence in Christ.

## **Our Father**

United to Christ, we pray as his Body, praying as he taught us. This prayer is particularly appropriate, as we are to receive our "daily bread" - in this case the "Bread of Life", Jesus himself.

## **Sign of Peace**

An important action of the Mass. Christ instructed his disciples to leave their offering at the altar and make peace with any of the brothers with whom they had a dispute so that the communion they entered into with God in Holy Communion should be visibly expressed in the communion in which they lived with their neighbours (Mt. 5:23-24). In addition, we are not simply communicating our own forgiveness to each other and resolving disputes, we are also acting as the Body of Christ: his first words in appearing to the Apostles after the Resurrection were "*Peace be with you*" (Jn. 20:19) which is alluded to by the Priest in the prayer immediately preceding the sign of peace ("*Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your Apostles 'I leave you peace, my peace I give you'*"). We are communicating to each other the peace that only Christ can bring, the peace that flows from unity with the Father in the communion of the Church.

## **Lamb of God**

This three-fold prayer asking for peace occurs at the time of the fraction - the priest breaks the consecrated host and drops a piece into the chalice, praying that this mingling of the Body and Blood of Christ may bring eternal life to those who receive it. The fraction is significant since St. Paul saw that in receiving from a single loaf, the Church saw an image of her own unity - we are one body because we have all received from the same loaf. In addition, the fraction has come to be symbolic of the death of Christ himself - as his body was broken on the cross, so we receive his broken body in Holy Communion. A piece of the host is dropped into the chalice according to a custom begun by the Popes in the early Middle Ages - each priest would take with him a particle of the host consecrated by the Pope to their own Church in the city of Rome to place in the chalice as a sign of their unity with their bishop (the Pope) and of the single-ness of the Mass (no matter where it is celebrated, each Mass is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, and so all Masses are truly one action, an eternal present.). The text of the Lamb of God invocation is very ancient and refers directly to Christ: at the Passover, the Jews sacrificed a lamb as the substitute for the first-born son, whom God spared in Egypt. Now, in the New Covenant, God offers us the true and eternal first-born son, his own Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true Lamb, whose death on the cross saved the lives of the Church, the New Israel, which is called God's first-born of the nations in the Old Testament.

## **Holy Communion**

Whole books have been written about what we do in receiving Holy Communion. We echo the words of the good Centurion "*Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.*" In this moment, we receive into our bodies the very person of the God who created us by the act of his will, and who sacrificed his life for our eternal life. We can have no deeper or greater unity with God on this earth than that which is offered in Holy Communion. It is said that even the angels kneel

and marvel at what God does for us in this moment, for even they, who are perfect and holy have never been united to God in such an intimate way. We are raised by God above the greatest of the angels in an act of infinite humility and love. This is a time for the most intense prayer and thanksgiving.

### **Post-Communion Prayer**

This concludes the rite of Communion and will refer to the graces that we may receive through the gift of Holy Communion with God. Again addressed to the Father, it is offered in the name of the Saviour whom we have just received.

## **(5) THE RITE OF BLESSING AND DISMISSAL**

### **Solemn or Simple Blessing**

In the name of Christ, whom he represents, the priest blesses his people. The dismissal is a formal action of the Church: having been fed on the life of the Saviour, the people of the Church are commissioned to take Christ into the world and their homes. We are called to live in the light of Christ and to bring his presence wherever we go.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford