



# Understanding the Mass

## Part I

### *The Introductory Rites*

#### **When does Mass begin?**

Remotely, Mass begins when you are sent from Mass the previous Sunday as everything you do during the week is preparation for the coming Sunday. Key to this time is actually preparing for Mass by reading the Scriptures assigned to the next Sunday. They are easily available online.

In a more immediate way, Mass begins when you decide you are going to Church. The manner of your dress and the positive attitude you take with you sets the tone for your experience of the Liturgy. Remember your action is prophetic as those around you see you witness to the centrality of your faith.

#### **Significance of the Church Bell**

The ringing of church bells in the Catholic tradition dates back to the end of the 4th century and was sanctioned by Pope Sabinianus in the 604. Prior to this bells were rung by pagans to ward off evil spirits. While some of this understanding may have carried over in the early Church, today bells are rung to symbolize the Voice of God calling people to come forth from their homes or workplaces and to assemble for worship. At the end of Mass, the bells are rung to signify the joy that the assembly has in being sent as the voice of God to proclaim the Good News.

#### **Arrival at the Church**

Whether you walk to church or drive, once you arrive at the church grounds, your preparation for Mass should become more serious. Why are you

here? What do you need from God? What is God asking of you? The church grounds should be well maintained so that the lawns, flowers, trees, statues and shrines direct attention to the sacred nature of this space.

#### **Greeting Others before Mass**

The communal nature of worship means that others will be present. Taking time to greet others is perfectly acceptable. At the same time, we must be aware of those who are preparing themselves for Mass by quiet prayer.

#### **Entering the Church**

The doors of a church are significant and symbolize the person of Christ who is the Way and the One through whom we enter into union with God. Holy water is placed near the entrance to remind us that we first entered into Christ through the Sacrament of Baptism. Here we make the simplest of all prayers as we sign ourselves with the Cross and call upon the Holy Trinity.



#### **Genuflecting or Bowing Profoundly**

Before entering a pew or finding a seat, we take a moment to acknowledge God's presence among us by "bending the knee" in adoration, especially when the

Most Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle behind the main altar. Those unable to genuflect may make a profound bow.

#### **The Purpose of the Introductory Rites**

So far everything we have done has been done individually. The remaining parts of the Introductory Rites are intended to "gather" individuals together and to make them one community that is ready to listen, to celebrate, and to manifest the presence of Christ.

#### **The Entrance Song**

The old adage reminds us that "those who sing, pray twice." By joining together in song, the assembly unites their voices and, if done well, lifts their minds to Sacred Mysteries about to be celebrated.

## The Procession

The ministers along with the deacon and priest make their way from the gathering space to the sanctuary. In so doing, they are supposed to direct the attention of the assembly to the altar which is Christ. This is not a time for high fives or hellos, but of focusing on the mysteries at hand. The deacon and priest reverence the altar with a kiss acknowledging Christ's presence.



## The Sign of the Cross and Greeting

Though all too often done without thinking, the Sign of the Cross at the beginning of Mass invites us into the mystery of the Holy Trinity and work of salvation accomplished by Christ on the

cross. The words of the greeting which follow likewise make real this invitation.

## The Act of Penance

After the greeting and welcome, the presider invites the assembly to a moment of silent reflection wherein each person acknowledge that they have sinned and are in need of God's forgiveness.

**The Confiteor** is one of the Acts of Penitence that may be prayed...*I confess to Almighty God...*it helps us to understand that we sin by commission and omission and that ask the Blessed Mother, the Angels and Saints together with those gathered to pray that we be forgiven. During the Confiteor we strike our breast, according to Saint Jerome, as a physical sign that we wish to dispel evil from our hearts. Only one strike of the breast is required even though the common practice is to strike the breast three times.

**Kyrie Eleison** is the Greek text for the English, Lord, have mercy. This phrase is meant to praise God as we call upon His mercy. The focus is not us as sinners, but on God who loves us despite knowing that we have sinned. The prayer of absolution that follows does not have the same effect as celebrating the Sacrament of Penance.

**Blessing and Sprinkling of Holy Water** is an option that replaces the two Acts of Penitence above. On Sundays, especially during the Easter Season, the blessing and sprinkling of holy water during the introductory rites again unifies the assembly which in this act recalls baptism, the sacrament through which we enter the Church, the Body of Christ.

## The Glory to God

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will" (Luke 2:14) is an ancient hymn of praise, echoing the song of the angels at Bethlehem proclaiming Jesus' birth. Having asked for God's forgiveness, now we praise Him for His goodness. We can think of this as being meant to cheer us up in case we get down about our sins. The Gloria is omitted during Advent as a reminder we are waiting for Jesus to come, so we hold off doing anything joyful until His birth; and it is also omitted during Lent because, in light of our sins, we subdue our joy until the celebration of His resurrection.

The text elaborates on this message of the angels, recognizing the goodness and mercy of the Lord God through his Son, Jesus Christ. This prayer dates back to the sixth century and began to be used only at Masses when a bishop was the celebrant, and then only on solemn feasts. However, the beauty of this prayer captivated the priests and faithful. Slowly, permission was granted for priests to use it, but at first only for Easter. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Glory to God reached its current level of use within the Mass. Today, the Glory to God is sung or said at all Sunday Masses, solemnities, and feasts except during the seasons of Advent and Lent. Even during Advent and Lent, the Glory to God is sung or said at weddings, ordinations and other festive occasions in the life of the Church. Whether sung or said, this prayer is one of praise, and our voices should be lifted in praise as we say it!

## The Collect or Opening Prayer

Rather than Opening Prayer this prayer is more properly called the Collect. The presider announces "Let us pray." During a moment of silence, the assembly does just that as they call to mind their needs before God. The prayer which follows and is particular to the Sunday or the particular celebration has the purpose of "collecting" the prayers of the assembly into one and offering them to the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit. All are then invited to say "amen" (I believe) in unison having been made one body ready and willing to listen to the Word of God.

