

The Gates of Heaven are Lightly Locked: Part II

An overview of the Mass

I. The Mass is the highest celebration in the Catholic Church and stands at the summit of our faith. For in the Mass Jesus Christ truly becomes present to us in the Eucharist and we are joined with the faithful throughout all of time and space in our worship of God and progress toward the eternal realms.

A. The Eucharist and the Mass are inseparable. The Mass is the celebration of the Eucharist; and while the Eucharist can be given as Holy Communion outside of Mass, a priest can consecrate the Eucharist only at a Mass.

1. The bread and wine become the true body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ in the Mass and in particular during the Eucharistic Prayer when the priest does two things. First, during the epiclesis (which means in Greek “the invocation”), the priest calls upon the Holy Spirit to come down upon the bread and wine. Then he recites the words that Jesus Christ spoke at the Last Supper, through which He gave us the first Eucharist. “With the Eucharistic Prayer - the prayer of thanksgiving and consecration - we come to the heart and summit of the celebration.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1352.

2. Thus, the Eucharist is the high point of the Mass and in fact of the whole Catholic life of faith. “In the most blessed Eucharist is contained the entire spiritual wealth of the Church, namely, Christ Himself as our Pasch [Passover] and the Bread of Life.” Vatican II Council, Presbyterorum Ordinis (1965) 5. “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1324.

3. Christ remains present in the Eucharist after the Mass as long as the symbols of bread (and wine if preserved) remain. Because Christ continues to be present in the Eucharist, we are reverent and prayerful in the presence of the Eucharist at all times. And there is in fact a liturgy of Eucharistic Adoration outside of Mass, which is celebrated here on First Fridays. “The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go and meet in Him in adoration, in contemplation full of love, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world.” St. Pope John Paul II, *Dominicae Canae* (1983), quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1380.

B. In addition, at the Mass, Jesus Christ through His Church overcomes the barriers of space and time to re-present His suffering, death and resurrection; and He becomes truly present to us. “When the church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover and it is made present. The sacrifice of Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1364.

1. Jesus instituted the Mass at the Last Supper, but Mass is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, and Jesus returns to us now risen from the dead. It is not that Jesus is sacrificed again and again, as the Letter to the Hebrews makes clear. Heb. 9:25-26. Rather, the barriers of time and space are overcome and the sacrifice of Calvary becomes present; or, to put it another way, we are transported in time to

Calvary. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1362-67. In the Eucharist, the Risen Christ comes among us as assuredly as He did when He rose from the dead almost 2000 years ago, the Church gives thanks to the Almighty God for the Redemption won through this sacrifice of His Son. See Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) 47.

2. By overcoming space and time and uniting us with Christ, the Eucharist also unites the entire Church throughout the world and throughout all the ages, “The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1325.

C. The whole of the Mass is meant to reflect our pilgrimage to heaven and to be a first taste of the prayers and celebration in heaven. See Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium 8.

1. The ancient temple was built upon the pattern in heaven that Moses saw. See Heb. 8:5-6. The idea is that there is a worship of God in heaven and that even the ancient Jewish sacrifices reflected to some degree this worship. (The Book of Revelation regularly refers to this worship in heaven.) Now the Mass reflects this worship even more.

2. The central Jewish feast and sacrifice was the Passover. Jesus used the occasion of this feast to institute the Mass as the Last Supper. See Matt 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38. The Passover Lamb was to be a perfect lamb sacrificed within the family. The blood would keep the people from the death that would come to others (there the Egyptians) because of their contact with the angels of heaven. Passover was also the celebration of their liberation from slavery in Egypt, a symbol of all slavery to sin. And they had to eat the Passover Lamb in order to be a part of God’s Chosen People. See Ex. 12:1-13.

- Likewise, the Mass is the celebration of Christ’s sacrifice, which paid the debt of our sin, and thus saves us from everlasting death. Through Jesus, we are enabled to be in the company of heaven beyond death. Through His sacrifice, and through His body and blood, which we consume, we are freed from sin.

3. God commanded that the Chosen People hold the Passover and the other feasts “as a perpetual ordinance.” See Ex. 12:14. The feasts in themselves were fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus, see Hebrews 10:1-25, but the command that they be celebrated continually is still fulfilled in the Mass.

II. The Mass is divided into two main parts and two supporting parts. The main parts are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The supporting parts are the Introductory Rites and the Concluding Rites. They proceed from preparing the way for God, to guidance for the passage, to the actual presence of Christ and re-presentation of His sacrifice on Calvary, and finally a commissioning to bring His salvation into the world.

A. The introductory rite prepares us for the entrance into God’s presence. Although at times God, or an angel, would appear to people suddenly, in general people were supposed to

prepare themselves for God's presence, e.g., on Mount Sinai and in the Temple. See Ex. 19:9-15; Neh. 9:1-2. The priests of the Old Testament had to prepare themselves carefully before approaching the Ark of the Covenant for sacrifices. E.g., Ex. 40:12-15; Lev. 8:14-30; 22; 2 Chron. 5:11. The Day of Atonement was meant to obtain forgiveness of sins so that all Israelites would be worthy to be God's people. See Lev. 16, 23:26-31. Isaiah and the Book of Revelation likewise present the prophet and then St. John as recognizing their unworthiness to be in God's presence, but then His grace that makes them worthy. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:6; Rev. 1:17-19

B. The Liturgy of the Word proclaims God's written word to us before the personal Word of God become present. This proclamation of the written word of God reflects the fact that God prepared His people through revealing Himself in words and deeds throughout the Old Testament; and then, after this long preparation, the Son came to earth as Emmanuel, God with us. In addition, the Chosen People heard the word of God, and a summary of His saving acts, in preparation for entrance into the Promised Land, and again when the Temple was dedicated and rededicated so that God's presence would again be more easily accessible to them. Duet. 5:1-33; 1 Kings 8:12-21; Neh. 9:3-31. In the Liturgy of the Word we receive Jesus' "words of eternal life" before we receive Him as the bread of eternal life. See John 6:68. In the context of describing Himself as the Bread of Life, Jesus said, "Everyone who listens to My Father and learns from Him comes to Me." John 6:45.

C. Standing at the high point of the faith, the Liturgy of the Eucharist brings Jesus Christ to us in the Eucharist. The prayers leading up to the consecration prepare the way by offering God bread and wine, along with other offerings representing our lives. As Jesus prayed the high priestly prayer at the Last Supper before this sacrifice, see John 17, so we progress up to the sacrifice of the altar with offering of the Eucharistic Prayer. See also 1 Kings 8:22-53 (the prayer of Solomon before the consecration of the Temple.)

D. The Concluding, or Dismissal Rites, reflect a commissioning to bring the written word of God we have heard and the personal Word of God we have received forth into the world. When Jesus appeared after the Resurrection, He commissioned His disciples to bring the Gospel to all the world. See Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 14:16-18; Luke 24:25-29; Acts 1:8. Above all, at Pentecost, He sent the Spirit upon Mary and His disciples so that they could witness to the faith. The Concluding Rites reflect this commissioning. See Acts 2:1-42.

E. These parts of the Mass reflect, not only the last Supper, but also the appearance of the risen Christ to His disciples on the road to Emmaus and Jesus' public ministry as a whole. See Luke 24:13-35; St. Pope John Paul II, Mane Nobiscum Domine (October 7, 2004).

1. The disciples on the road to Emmaus, although unaware of the fact, were being prepared for Jesus's presence by mourning the events surrounding His death, and longing for His presence. Jesus then came to them (without their knowing who He was) and opened the word of Scriptures to them, explaining how they pointed to Him. At the end of the journey, they invited Him to stay with them; and He accepted their invitation. Jesus then revealed Himself to them in the breaking of the bread. After recognizing His presence, the disciples immediately proceeded to Jerusalem, despite

the dangers of nighttime travel, to tell others about Jesus.

2. The Mass also reflects the progress of Jesus' public ministry. For He was introduced by John the Baptist with his preaching and call to repentance. Then, through His own preaching and actions, Jesus gradually revealed the fullness of truth to His disciples and prepared the way for His sacrifice. Having completed this preparation, and then beginning with the Last Supper, Jesus then completed the work of salvation through His passion, death, and resurrection. He then sent His disciples forth to bring His salvation to the world. The Mass reflects this progression through the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Dismissal Rites, respectively.

III Various items used during the Mass reflect aspects of the sacrifice of the Mass.

A. The altar was, in ancient Israel, the place for sacrifices, or animals, wheat, olive oil and other foods. Christ Himself fulfills those sacrifices, offering Himself up for our sins. See Heb. 9:11-26.

1. Traditionally, there have been relics of the saints, especially martyrs, underneath the altar. Part of the idea is that they join in the sacrifice and celebration. See Rev. 6:9.
- This placement of relics is now optional but recommended. For having the relics of saints beneath the altar connects the worship of heaven and earth.

2. The altar traditionally faces east, reflecting both the symbolism of Jesus as the rising sun, and of the Mass as the first promise of the never-ending day of heaven. See Mal. 3:19-20; Luke 2:78. Many altars are in fact surrounded by an archway, or (as with this parish an image of an archway) reflecting the fact that in the Mass the gates of eternity are opened, both to the timeless sacrifice on Calvary, and to never-ending feast and worship of heaven.

3. The candles surrounding the altar reflect both Jesus as the light of the world, see John 1:3-5, 8:12, and the lights and lamp-stands at the beginning of the Book of Revelation that represent the churches and their angels that surround the Son of Man. See Rev. 1:12-13, 20

B. The vestments mostly come from ancient Roman and Greek garments. But the notion of a priest wearing vestments reflects the ancient Israeli priests' vestments. See Ex. 28; 39:1-31. In addition, the symbolic value attached to them reflects Christian virtues.

1. The alb is the white robe worn by a priest or deacon at Mass and often at other liturgies. It can also be worn by anyone with a liturgical role in a liturgy. The alb reflects the holiness received at baptism and meant to continue throughout life, being fully conferred upon the saints. See Rev. 3:5; 7:9-10.

2. The amice is the cloth that goes around the neck underneath the alb, covering the neck. It represents the helmet of salvation meant that wards off attacks of the enemy. Eph. 6:17; 1 Thess. 5:18. See also Is. 59:8. Its practical purpose is to ensure that the priest is clothed in white from shoulder to foot.

3. The cincture, the rope that the priest wears as a belt, represents the self-control fitting for one who ministers at the altar. See, e.g., Dan. 10:5 (a figure, apparently the angel Gabriel, wearing a belt of gold); 1 Tim 4:7-12. Once again, there is a practical purpose, for the cincture keeps the alb on straight.

4. The stole represents the authority of a priest (or deacon.). See Ex 28:4 (referring to a sash worn by priests); Rev. 1:13 (Jesus in glory wearing a sash of gold.) While it is no longer required, many priests tie the stole into the cincture, both for the practical reason of keeping it in place, and because it is symbolic of authority and self-control being tied together.

5. The chasuble worn by the priest represents charity covering all things. Col 3:12-13.

C. There are specific prayers priests commonly pray when vesting for Mass. The text is optional, but the following are the traditional prayers,

1. When washing hands before Mass the traditional prayer is, "Give virtue to my hands, O Lord, that being cleansed from all stain I might serve you with purity of mind and body."

2. When putting on the amice, the traditional prayer is, "Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil."

3. When putting on the alb, the traditional prayer is, "Make me white, O Lord, and cleanse my heart; that being made white in the Blood of the Lamb I may deserve an eternal reward."

4. When putting on the cincture, the traditional prayer is, "Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity, and quench in my heart the fire of concupiscence, that the virtue of continence and chastity may abide in me."

5. When putting on the stole, the traditional prayer is, "Lord, restore the stole of immortality, which I lost through the collusion of our first parents, and, unworthy as I am to approach Thy sacred mysteries, may I yet gain eternal joy."

6. When putting on the chasuble, the traditional prayer is, "O Lord, who has said, 'My yoke is sweet and My burden light,' grant that I may so carry it as to merit Thy grace."

D. The idea of having sacred vessels made of gold or silver comes from the ancient Jewish practice of using gold vessels for the sacrifices in the Temple. See, e.g., 1 Kings 7:48-50.

1. The chalice is the sacred vessel used for the Eucharist under the form of bread.

2. The paten is the sacred vessel used for the large host, and possibly other hosts at Mass. In the Latin rite, the hosts are made of pure unleavened bread, for that would have been the type of bread Jesus used at the Last Supper.

E. The incense that can be used at Mass reflects both the offering of prayers to God by the saints, and the cloud that surrounds the presence of God, e.g., at Mount Sinai, the dedication of the Temple, and the Transfiguration. See Ex. 19:9, 16-20; 1 Kings 19:2, 8-14; Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:8; Luke 9:28-36; Rev. 8:3.