

The Gates of Heaven are Lightly Locked: Part III

The Introductory Rites

I. In general, the introductory rites are meant to bring the people together to worship in company with the angels and saints and to prepare the people for the presence of God.

A. The introductory rites are comprised of an entrance, a greeting, a penitential rite, the Gloria (on Sundays, solemnities and feast days) and the opening prayer, also called a collect.

B. As the General Instructions to the Roman Missal say, “The purpose of these rites is that the faithful who are assembling should become a community and dispose themselves to listen properly to God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.” General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) 46. The idea is that we gather as the people of God and ask God to make us worthy to be in His presence. See Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:46; 1 Cor. 11:27-32.

II. The entrance involves a procession and is accompanied by either a song or an antiphon for the day or the season.

A. It is natural to celebrate as one approaches the presence of God. See Col. 3:16. The rejoicing in the Lord that music expresses helps also drive out the temptation to evil. See Eph. 5:18-20.

B. There is a tradition from the old Latin Rite Mass for the priest to recite a passage from Psalm 43, “Why should I go mourning oppressed by the foe? I will come to the altar of God, the God of my joy!” That psalm, among many others, expresses a desire to enter rejoicing into God’s presence despite (or perhaps because of) the presence of much oppression. See also Ps. 84:1, 11; Psalm 122:1; 147:1, 149:1. See also 2 Sam. 6:14-16; Matt. 25:6. As the Book of Revelation expresses over and over again, the glory of God descends into a world that is often oppressed by sin.

C. With the procession, there should be a sacred hymn, the Gradual (verses from the Psalms put to music,) or an antiphon. The antiphon, if it is used, is a quotation from Scripture that introduces a theme for the Mass. For Ordinary Time, the antiphon from Sunday is used unless the Mass is for a memorial, feast day or special purpose.

D. The procession always includes the priest and any deacon, acolytes or others serving at the altar. It may also involve incense (expressing both the lifting up of prayers to God and the mystery of God), candles (reflecting joy at God’s presence and Jesus as light of the world), and the lectors. The Book of the Gospels may also be carried in, reflecting the truth of God, which proclaims the personal Word of God, is coming to the people. See, e.g., John 1:6-9. There is a notion of the glory of God coming into the Church as the glory of God came down upon Mount Sinai and to the temple in Jerusalem, and finally as Jesus came to Jerusalem. See, e.g., Ex. 19:16-25; 1 Kings 8:10-13; Ezek. 43:1-9; Matt 21:1-11.

E. Those in the procession genuflect toward the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle; or, if there is no tabernacle in the church, they bow toward the altar. The idea is to show the Son of Man the reverence due to Him, and, therefore, to have Him make us worthy to be in His presence. See, e.g., Rev. 1:17-19. 5:6-14.

F. The priest reverences the altar, for that will be the throne of Jesus, the Son of God. See, e.g., Luke 7:36-38 (the penitent woman kissing the feet of Jesus); Is. 6:1 (the magnificence of the throne of God); Dan. 7:9-10; Rev. 4:1. This reverence also signifies marriage of Christ (represented by the priest) with His Church (represented by the altar). See Eph. 5:32-33; Rev. 21:1-2,9-10.

G. The priest may also incense the altar and the crucifix to show reverence to them. Incense is symbolic of the aura of the holy, as with the cloud surrounding the Temple and Jesus Himself; it is also symbolic of our prayers rising to heaven. See, e.g., Ex. 19:16-19, 40:34; 1 King 8:10-13; Is. 6:4; Ez. 10:4-8:18-23; Dan. 7:13; Matt 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-26; Rev. 1:7, 5:8.

III. The greeting involves the reverence of the altar, the sign of the cross, and a greeting of the people.

A. The priest begins with the sign of the Cross places the priest and all the faithful in the presence of God. The phrase “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” was used by Christ in His commissioning of the disciples just before His ascension. See Matt 28:28. But the overall idea of the privilege of knowing God’s name, and thus invoking the power of that name, is a common theme of Scripture. See, e.g. Ex. 20:7; Ps. 72:17-19, 124:8; 135:1; Joel 3:5 Matt. 6:9. Likewise, in the New Testament, the name of Jesus takes on great power. See, e.g., Matt. 18:20, Luke 10:72; John 14:13; 15:26, 16:24; Acts 3:6, 4:12, 5:40-42; Phil 2:9-10.

- The people respond “Amen.” For “amen” is an affirmation from the depths of one’s soul. See 1 Chron. 16:13; Ps. 44:14, 72:19, 89:53, 106:48 (the psalms expressing the faith of the whole people), Rev. 5:14. Jesus is the “Amen” of God, the final affirmation of His power and love. Rev. 3:14.

B. There are three possible greetings, which reflect blessings used by early Christians and even by the angels.

1. The most traditional greeting is “The Lord be with you.” This greeting reflects the angel Gabriel’s words to Mary, as well as the angel’s greeting to Gideon, see Judges 6:12, Luke 1:28. It was also used as a general blessing. See Ruth 2:4.

2. The greeting “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” comes from the end of the second letter to the Corinthians, where St. Paul is calling upon the people of God to be unified in worship and a life of faith.

3. The greeting “Grace to you and peace from God our Father, “ comes from the

beginnings of the letters to the Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, and both letter to the Corinthians,

4. The response “and with your spirit” both reflects a courteous response, see Ruth 2:4, and a desire that Jesus be with one in the height of one’s life. See, e.g., 1 Thess. 5:23; Rev. 1:10. The spirit is the highest part of the soul, through which we make a decision for or against God. See Catechism 367-68. There is also a prayer that the God continue to confirm the spirit of ordination that a cleric has received. St. Paul refers to this spirit of ordination in a letter to the young bishop Timothy. See 2 Tim. 1:6-7.

C. The celebrant may also give a short introduction to the Mass.

IV. The penitential rite is designed to ask God to make us more worthy to be in God’s presence. The idea is that we repent of sins so that God may make us worthy to enter His presence. See Ps. 51:14; Is. 6: Luke 5:8-10; 14:11; 18:9-14; 1 John 1:19.

A. The priest begins with the words, “Let us acknowledge our sins and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.” The first part of the introduction recognizes that we are of ourselves unworthy to enter into God’s presence. But then there is the confidence that, if we recognize that unworthiness and are open to God’s grace, God will make us worthy to enter the mysteries of the faith through the grace of God. See 1 John 1:7-10.

1. The term mysteries here refer to the liturgies of the Church, and here the Mass, which make the invisible realm present to us in visible form. In a similar way the second part of the Catechism, which describes the sacraments and all of the liturgies, is entitled, “The celebration of the Christian mystery.”

2. That introduction is followed by either the Confiteor (Latin for “I confess”) or a set of tropes that express repentance of sins and confidence in God.

B. The full Confiteor expresses acknowledgment of sins and a desire for the prayers of all present, and the angels and saints for forgiveness. See 2 Macc. 15:12-16; Is. 6:5-7; James 5:16; Heb. 12:1.

1. There is a comprehensiveness about the Confiteor, covering thoughts, words, deeds, commissions, and omissions and asking all on earth and in heaven for their prayers. The confession is first to God, but then to all others. See 1 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 32:5. There is also a request for the entire community to pray for one’s conversion. For we are saved, not only as individuals, but as members of a community.

2. The threefold, “mea culpa” reflects a common threefold repetition that emphasizes a point. For there is a tradition, common in Hebrew, of repeating a word three times to emphasize it. See, e.g., Is. 6:3; John 21:15-17; Rev. 4:8.

C Another option is to use a three-fold trophe for the Penitential Rite. The missal gives eight options for the trophes and also provides that the celebrant or the deacon may use “these or similar words.” The different options address our prayers to Jesus and focus on different ways of approaching him (e.g., focusing on Jesus as saving us from sins as with the first option, Jesus as God and man as in the fifth option, or Jesus as the way, the truth and the light, as with the eighth option.)

D. Both the Confiteor and the three-fold trophes end with “Lord, have mercy” said twice and “Christ, have mercy” said once. Here again, there is a three-fold prayer. These phrases invoke God’s covenantal love for His people and willingness to forgive us so that our relationship with Him may be strengthened and continued. Ps. 51:3; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 17:13; 18:14, 38-39.

E. The penitential rite can be replaced by a sprinkling rite. This rite reflects the purification of the people, first in baptism and then further by repentance and the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. See Ps. 51:3-4; Is. 1:18; Ex. 36:25; Zech. 13:1; Heb. 10:22.

V. On Sundays (other than Lent and Easter), solemnities and feast days, the priest and the congregation sing or recite the Gloria. The Gloria is an ancient hymn of the Church that unites the Church throughout time and space, and invokes the angels to accompany us in praising God and entreating His favor. It reflects the great hymns of praise in the writings of St. Paul, St. John and the Book of Revelation. See, e.g., Eph. 1:2-10; Phil 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 John 1:1-4; Rev. 11:17-18; 12:10-12. It is centered on Jesus, but has a Trinitarian theme, invoking God as Father first, then as Son, and finally as Holy Spirit.

A. The opening phrase, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth” comes from the proclamation of the angels at the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:14. It also reflects the proclamation of the crowds as Jesus came into Jerusalem. See Luke 19:38.

B. The Gloria invokes God as “heavenly king” the basis upon which all rightful power rests. See, e.g., Ps. 24:7-10; Dan. 7:9-12; 1 Tim. 1:17. But it then refers to Him as Almighty God and Father, Father both of the divine Son and of His people. The Old Testament several times refers to God as Father of His whole people, see Duet. 32:6, Hos. 11:3-8, Is. 63:15-16, Jer. 31:9, 20. But Jesus reveals God as Father, both in a Trinitarian sense and as the loving Father of each person who is willing to receive Him. This status of adopted sonship is always in the context of His people. See, e.g., Matt. 6:9, 14-15; John 5:17-18, 10:30 14:6-14, 20:17; Rom. 8:14-18; 2 Cor. 1:3. That is why the Lord’s Prayer refers to “Our Father” and not “My Father.” See Catechism 2790-2793. Thus we recognize both the might and power of God as our Lord and also His love for us and our love for Him as Our Father.

- The Gloria expresses the range of types of prayer: worship, thanks, and praise. The Latin uses five terms, for praising, blessing, adoring, giving glory, and giving thanks. See Rev. 7:12. The Catechism describes these different types of prayer, along with prayers of petition and intercession, which the Gloria will then include in the section on Jesus.

C. The Gloria then turns to Jesus, referring to Him first as the only begotten Son of God. The idea is that God is Father to us by adoption, but to Jesus by original nature. See Heb. 1:1-14. The Gloria (in the Latin) then goes on to praise Jesus as Lord God, Lamb of God, and Son of God. The first and third titles affirm His divinity, with the middle one indicating His sacrificial offering for us, fulfilling the symbolic role of the Paschal Lamb. See Luke 1:32; John 1:29, 36.

- We ask Jesus both to receive our prayer and have mercy on us. The idea is that we can approach God and offer Him our prayers efficaciously now that Jesus has reconciled us with God. See Romans 8:34.

- The phrase, “You alone are the Holy One, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High” is taken from passages that indicate God’s triumph over the forces oppressing His enemies. See Duet. 4, 39; Ps. 83:19, 97:9; Dan. 3:45; Rev. 15:4. The notion is that God’s forgiveness of His People’s sins is the primary triumph, from which proceeds the worship of God and establishment of His reign. The liturgy also is often portrayed, especially in the Books of Psalms and Revelation as part of the triumph of God over His enemies. See, e.g., Ps. 149; Rev. 8:3-5.

D. The Gloria ends with a praise of Jesus as with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Part of the idea is to express the inseparability of the Three Divine Persons. See, e.g., Luke 1:35; John 14:15-31, 15:26-16:14.

VI. The opening prayer, called the collect, contains an invocation, a petition, and a conclusion.

A. This prayer is traditionally addressed to the Father through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. See GIRM 54.

B. The prayer sets up the theme for the Mass, such as the celebration of the season, or the saint of the day.

C. The collect ends with the words “through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever”; (2) “Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit one God forever and ever”; or (3) if the prayer is addressed to the Son, “You live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. In all cases, the prayer is addressed through Jesus Christ as our mediator, for all of our prayers and actions should be made in union with Jesus Christ as Head of the Church. In addition, there is a recognition that Jesus is our great high priest and Savior, who always prays for us. See Fr. Edward McNamara, “Through Christ our Lord,” Zenit.org (May 13, 2014.)

D. The prayers express the fact that Jesus reigns alongside of the Father, see Ps. 110:1, a point that the prayers of the Book of Revelation makes clear. Rev. 4:11; 5:13, 7:10-11, 12:10.