

THE MASS AS THE BEGINNING OF HEAVEN ON EARTH – PART I

THE MEANING AND STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

I. 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.

A. 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.

1. When Moses went up Mount Sinai, first to receive the Law and then as penance for the Chosen People, he was allowed into the presence of God in the midst of fire, storm, earthquake and thunder from heaven with a power and splendor such that only he could approach that glory. See Ex. 19:16-25, 24:15-18.

2. Upon Mount Sinai, God instructed Moses to have the Chosen People build the Ark of the Covenant as the throne of His glory on earth. This ark would be housed in the Tent of Meeting and then in the Temple after it was built by Solomon. See Ex. 25-31; Num. 10:33-35; 1 Kings 8-10. God would send His presence upon it with a splendor that only Moses and the high priest could see.

- Only the high priest could enter the part of the Tent and then the Temple that contained the Ark, a place called the Holy of Holies. And eventually, even he would enter only once per year on the Day of Atonement. See Lev. 17:11

3. However, the Ark was lost during the Babylonian Exile. In 587 B.C., the prophet Jeremiah hid it in the mountains to keep it from being desecrated by the invaders. It has never since been recovered. And there is was destined to remain until God would gather His people together again in mercy and His glory appears again. See 2 Macc. 2:4-8.

4. After the Babylonian Exile the Temple was rebuilt; and, by the time of Christ it was possibly physically more glorious than before. In (at least partial) fulfillment of ancient prophecies, people from nations all over the Roman Empire were coming to the Temple, sensing that something glorious was there. See, e.g., Is. 56:6-8, 60:4-7; Haggai 2:7-9; Zech 13:16;

- However, the Ark was still missing and thus the people still awaited the presence of God.
5. When Jesus came to the Temple, at first quietly in the Presentation and then with the ecstatic crowds on Palm Sunday, He was bringing now a greater glory than before to the Temple, the presence of God Himself. The veil of the old Holy of Holies was torn asunder at the Crucifixion, and the new Ark of the Covenant has been opened from heaven for all who believe. See Matt. 27:51; Rev. 11:19.
6. But He did not want the glory of that moment to be reserved for those few who were there. Before ascending into heaven, He promised, "I will be with You always until the end of time." Matt. 28:19.
7. And so, at the Last Supper, He instituted the Mass, which would maintain His presence with His faithful until the end of time, but now, not for the select few in one place, but rather for all the faithful wherever the Mass is celebrated. Thus, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of us as coming before the New Sinai and the New Temple to experience the glory of God in a greater fashion than even Moses ever saw. See Heb. 10:19-25. 12:18-24

B. The central Jewish feast and sacrifice was the Passover, the celebration of their freedom from slavery and calling as the People of God. The Mass fulfills this celebration, making us the new People of God, freed from sin and on our journey to the Promised Land.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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. And of all of the events of Christ's life, St. Paul refers to only three on this earth, His death, His resurrection, and the institution of the Eucharist.

- Jesus called this celebration the new and everlasting covenant. The prophets of old had promised a new in which all of us will know God in person and be filled with the Spirit. It is through the Mass that this covenant is renewed. See, e.g., Is. 55:1-5, 59:20-21, 61:8-11; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 34:25-31, 37:24-28.

4. Thus, 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.

II. Jesus instituted the Mass at the Last Supper, but it is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary and the celebration of the Eucharist, the presence of the Risen Christ among us, as well as the thanksgiving of the Church given to the Almighty God. See Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) 47; Catechism of the Catholic Church .

A. All four of the Gospels record the Last Supper, on of the very few events before the death and Resurrection of Christ that all four evangelists do record.

1. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all expressly record the institution of the Eucharist. Likewise, St. Paul expressly describes this institution in the context of calling the Corinthians to moral and liturgical reform. See 1 Cor. 11:23-32.

2. The Gospel according to John does not expressly describe the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead, the Last Supper narrative in John emphasizes: (1) Jesus' humility in washing the feet of the Apostles and His call for them to love one another in humility; and (2) His Last Supper discourse, culminating in His high priestly prayer for the holiness and unity of the Church. See John 13-17. Earlier, this Gospel has recorded Jesus' bread of life discourse, in which He described Himself as the Bread of Life, which His people would eat (literally chew) and drink to have life everlasting. See John 6:25-58.

B. The Mass is the highest of all liturgies, bringing the power and prayer of Christ and the whole Church to us here and now.

1. All liturgies are the high priestly prayer of Jesus prayed through the whole Church. See Sacrosanctum Concilium 7; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1071, 1073. The liturgy in fact joins the prayer of heaven and earth. See Sacrosanctum Concilium 8. The main liturgies are: (1) the Mass; (2) all the sacraments; (3) funerals and funeral vigils; (4) Eucharistic Adoration; and (5) the Divine Office, set prayers prayed by all clergy and consecrated religious brothers and sisters. Because they are prayer of the whole Church, there are certain definite rules that the celebrant or celebrants must follow, although there are also options.

2. By contrast, devotions are more prayers of the people in their own context. Some devotions, such as the Rosary and the Divine Mercy chaplet, are quite common, and have generally fixed principles and in fact official recognition from the Church. However, because they are more individual or local prayers, they are more flexible; and those praying them can customize them according to their needs. Sacrosanctum Concilium 13-14.

C. The Mass is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, for it brings forth all of the love and power of salvation that was shown on the Cross and makes this glory present to us now.

1. 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 1362-67. "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.

2. That is one reason why there should be a visible crucifix at every Mass.

3. In the Mass, there is thus the unity of all the faithful throughout time and space, and in fact between heaven and earth. See Catechism 1670.

4. And, in fact, the faithful are meant to offer the sacrifices of their lives in union with the sacrifice of Christ that all together may become a "living sacrifice of praise." See Catechism 1368-69.

D. The high point of the Mass is the consecration of the Eucharist, during which Christ becomes present to us as assuredly as He was present to His people when He walked visibly on this earth.

1. While retaining the physical attributes of bread and wine (called in philosophy the "attributes"), the nature of the bread and wine changes such that they are no longer bread and wine, but Jesus Himself, God and man. See Catechism

- Lesser things are partially changed by certain rites. Thus a ring becomes more than a ring when given in marriage. Cloth becomes a national flag when made into such. A simple object becomes more than an object when given as a gift.

- Here the transformation is complete. Not just the love and glory of Christ is present, as was the glory of God in the Ark long ago, but Jesus Himself.

2. All of Jesus is present in each particle of the Eucharist. Under the appearance of bread, the body of Christ becomes present, but because Jesus cannot be separated, all of Him must be present. And the same is true of the Eucharist under the appearance of wine; the blood of Christ is present; but, therefore, all of Christ must be present. The fact that all of Christ must be present if any of Him is present is part of what we call concomitance. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part III, question 76, article 1.

3. 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." Vatican II Council, Presbyterorum Ordinis (1965) 5. "The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life." Catechism of the Catholic Church 1324.

E. The Mass is also the greatest thanksgiving of the Church offered to the Almighty God.

1. The term Eucharist comes from the Greek work "eucharistia," which means thanksgiving. It is noteworthy that both at the multiplication of the loaves and at the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and then broke the bread before distributing it to the people. See, e.g., Matt. 15:35, 26:27 (the thanksgiving described in context of the wine); Mark 8:6, 14:22-23 (same); Luke 22:14-19; John 6:11.

2. At the Mass, in union with Christ, we recall the gifts God has given to us and praising Him and thus open ourselves to greater gifts poured forth upon us. See Catechism 1159-61

III. 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. General Instructions to the Roman Missal 28. 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. 19:9-12; Neh. 9:3. 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. There is an overall notion of approaching God with repentance and thus being rendered by Him worthy to being His presence. 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 before sending His Son. 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 5-33, 1 Kings 8:14-21; Neh. 9:3-37. In the Liturgy of the Word we received 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 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 Eucharist with prayers in 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 word of God as heard and the personal Word of God as received in the Eucharist forth into the world. When Jesus appeared after the Resurrection, He consistently commissioned His disciples to bring the gospel to others, at least implicitly. 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.

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; 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' presence by discussing the events surrounding His life and death, and longing for His presence. Jesus then came to them (without their knowing who He was) and opened the word of Scripture to them, explaining how it pointed to Him. They then invited Him to stay with them, and so they did. He 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. Jesus' public ministry was introduced by John the Baptist with his preaching and call to repentance. Then, through His preaching and actions, Jesus gradually revealed Himself and prepared the way for His sacrifice. Finally, from the Last Supper through His passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus accomplished the ultimate saving works for our salvation. He then sent His disciples forth to witness 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.

F. In addition, the progress of the Mass reflects any good narrative, with an introduction (the Introductory Rites), a buildup of the plot (the Liturgy of the Word), a climax (the Eucharist) and a Conclusion (the Dismissal Rite.)

IV. Some resources that may be helpful include:

A. Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963), the Vatican II Council constitution on the liturgy. This document is the baseline for all subsequent liturgical changes, as well as a description of the enduring theology of liturgies in general and the Mass in particular.

B. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002) by the Vatican II Congregation of Divine Worship and Sacraments. This document is the instructions for celebrating Mass as well as part of the instructions for the design of

churches.

- C. The Spirit of the Liturgy (2000) by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). As both then Pope John Paul II's leading assistant, and now the Pope, as well as one of the preeminent theologians of the last 100 years in his own right, this work is a classic commentary on the liturgy.

- D. Understanding the Mass (1989) by Fr. Charles Bellmonte. This book goes through the Mass point by point giving the theological meaning and rationale for the rites.

- E. Worthy is the Lamb (2004) by Thomas Nash. This engaging book describes the Scriptural background and timeless significance of the Mass and the Eucharist.

- F. The Lamb's Supper (1999) by Dr. Scott Hahn. This book describes how the Mass is connected to the Bible and in particular the Book of Revelation

- G. The Pope, The Council and the Mass by James Likoudis and Kenneth Whitehead. This book responds in detailed fashion to objections that the liturgical changes inaugurated by the Vatican II Council were a radical break from the past. The authors argue that the Council and Pope Paul VI authorized certain reasonable changes, and that the abuses developed later were not based on their directives.