

RCIA CLASS 11A – CATHOLIC LITURGY:  
AN INTRODUCTION AND A SENSE OF MYSTERY

I. I. The liturgy is the prayer of Jesus Christ through His whole Church, prayer that brings the power of God to earth. “In the Church’s liturgy the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated. The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and the end of all the blessings of creation and salvation. In His Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, He fills us with His blessings. Through His Word, He pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.” Catechism 1082.

A. The earthly liturgy joins the praises of heaven and earth together. As the Vatican II Council said, “In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God.” Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) 8; Catechism 1090.

B. Liturgies have this power because they are not simply private prayers, but join together the whole Church, visible and invisible. See Sacrosanctum Concilium 26. They join our praise of God to that of the whole Church and receive, in that communion, His blessings to us. The letter to the Hebrews says, “you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.” Heb. 12:22-24. Through the liturgy, we are brought in union with the Church in heaven to praise God and receive His blessings. The Psalmist of old rejoiced when he heard of a common pilgrimage to Jerusalem. See Ps.122. All the more do we rejoice at this common pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem that we live out in celebrating the liturgies of the Church.

C. The liturgy overcomes the barriers of space, but also of time, bringing the saving mysteries of Christ to us here and now. The liturgy thus “not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present. The Paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated, not repeated. It is the celebrations that are repeated, and in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present.” Catechism 1104. Before ascending into heaven, Christ promised His Apostles, “I will be with you always, unto the end of the age.” Matt. 28:20. Through the liturgy, Christ becomes especially present to us.

D. To ensure this unity of the people of God throughout all time and space, and this connection with heaven itself, the Church specifies rules according to which liturgies must be prayed. There are options, such as the music sung or intercessions offered during Mass; but the celebrant and the people should adhere to the instructions set forth in the rubrics, thus ensuring that their prayers are in fact the prayer of the whole Church. These rules are only superficially a limitation. At a deeper level, they are a guarantee of this joining of the whole Church together, on earth and in heaven, past present and future, and a guarantee of the legitimacy of our common worship

- E. The liturgy includes: (1) all of the sacraments, with the Mass and the Eucharist as central; (2) additional sacred occasions, such as Eucharistic Adoration, funeral vigils, burials and funerals outside of Mass; and (3) the Liturgy of the Hours, a series of prayers that clergy and consecrated brothers and sisters have solemnly promised to pray several times a day (five for a diocesan priest.) The Catechism recommends Eucharistic Adoration and the Liturgy of the Hours for the laity as well. See Catechism 1174-75. There is also a shorter form of the Liturgy of the Hours called the Book of Christian Prayer.
- F. The Vatican II Council, especially through its 1963 document on the liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, made a number of changes to the way in which we celebrate Mass and other liturgies. But it was also careful to call for continued stability and unity.
1. The document pointed out that there are both changeable and unchangeable aspects of every liturgy. Thus, people should expect the changeable elements to be updated so to accommodate different circumstances. The Church universal, and to some degree local authorities, can alter the changeable elements, but no one else should presume to do so on their own unless particular prayers are optional or flexible. The Council also said that the changes the Church makes should be careful and avoid unnecessary instability.
  2. In Part III, section C of Chapter 1, the document outlined ways in which the Council intended to increase pastoral and instructional value of the Mass and other liturgies. The main goals of the reform were: (1) more of a noble simplicity in the liturgy; (2) a broader scope of Scriptural readings; (3) more emphasis on homilies and teaching generally; and (4) the increased use of vernacular languages in the liturgy, although the use of Latin was to be preserved.
  3. In the Latin tradition of the Church, the required words of the liturgy are drafted in Latin first. Then, specific conferences (e.g., the International Committee of English in the Liturgy, or ICEL) make translations into different languages, and give them to the national bishops' conference and the Vatican for approval. For example, our current translation of the Missal, which governs the prayers of the Mass, began to be used in 2011. The current Lectionary, which sets forth the Scriptural readings for the Mass, began to be used in 2002. The rubrics and language for other liturgies have seen changes in the translations into English, or will so see such changes.
- G. Devotions are distinct from liturgies, for they are more the private prayers of the faithful, although they also have common characteristics that unite people throughout the world.
1. Because they are more individual prayers, they are more flexible; people can easily adapt them or add to them according to their needs, as long as such changes are consistent with the faith. See Sacrosanctum Concilium 13.

2. Perhaps the most common devotions are the Rosary, *lectio divina*, and the Stations of the Cross.
  - a. As Pope St. John Paul II wrote, through the Rosary, “the Christian people *sits at the school of Mary* and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love.” Apostolic letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae (2002) 1.
  - b. *Lectio divina* is the prayerful reading of the Bible, in which one reads a passage, asks what it says in general, what it says to myself, engages in conversation with God, enters more deeply into the mystery of His word, and then resolves to put this mystery into practice. “The process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.” Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini (2010) 87.
  - c. The Stations of the Cross, especially celebrated during the Lenten season, recall to mind the final hours of Good Friday, when Christ died for our salvation and thus won for us eternal life.
3. Devotions to saints give us a greater sense of their example and intercession, which inspire and guide us. For, as the Letter to the Hebrews states, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Heb. 12:1-2
4. Through these and other devotions, such as prayers before meals, chaplets, novenas, and simply private prayer, the faithful fulfill the words of Christ who called for us to proclaim by word and action, “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Luke 10:9; see Sacrosanctum Concilium 12.

II. The Church uses the liturgical year to order her celebrations, especially the Mass, along the lines of the mysteries of our redemption, centered on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, as well as His return in glory.

A. The liturgical year has five seasons, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time, with Ordinary Time divided into two parts. At the high point of the liturgical year is the Triduum, which ends Lent and begins the Easter season.

1. Advent is the 22 to 28 days just before Christmas, from the fourth Sunday before Christmas to the day before Christmas. During this time, the Church focuses on the preparation of the Chosen People of old for the coming of the Messiah, and our own preparation to welcome Jesus into our lives, now and at the end of all things on earth. This year, Advent began on Sunday, November 29.
2. The Christmas season begins on Christmas Eve and is marked with celebrations for such feasts as that of the Holy Family; the Epiphany, when

the magi came to visit Jesus; and the Baptism of the Lord, which launched Jesus' public ministry. The feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which is usually celebrated on the Sunday after January 6 (the traditional day for the Epiphany), concludes the Christmas season and prepares for Ordinary Time.

3. The English term Lent comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning Spring. There may also be a connection to the Latin word *lentus*, which means slow, tough and enduring. (The Latin term for this season is *Quadragesima*, which means simply 40 days.) Beginning with Ash Wednesday and continuing about 40 days through midday on Holy Thursday, Lent focuses on the final days of Christ's life leading up to His Crucifixion and especially on His sacrifice for us. The theme is more penitential and somber, for this season calls for us to focus on repenting from sin, building up discipline over our desires and comforts, focusing more on prayer and charity, and so joining more fully in Christ's self-sacrificing love for us and the world.
4. Concluding Lent and beginning Easter is the Triduum, the highest time of the year. The Triduum goes from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening through Easter Sunday. During the Triduum we celebrate the central events of history, Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection, as well as the Eucharist that makes them present.
5. Starting with the Easter Vigil and continuing 50 days through the Feast of Pentecost (when the Holy Spirit came in power to the first Christians) we celebrate the glorious season of Easter. (The English word Easter comes from an old English word meaning "the opening." The term in Latin is *Pascha*, which refers the Passover and to the Paschal mystery, i.e., the redemptive work of Christ culminating in His death and resurrection.) This season focuses on the Resurrection of Christ and on the early Church. There is a call for joyfulness and a sense of mission to proclaim the risen Christ, and anticipate even now everlasting glory in heaven.
6. The concept of "Ordinary Time" comes from the Latin words *ordo*, *ordinarius* and *ordinatus*, which imply a time that is steady, orderly, and even rhythmic. The first part of Ordinary Time begins after the Christmas season and continues until Lent; and the second part of Ordinary Time begins after the Easter season and continues until Advent. It thus consists of thirty-three or thirty-four weeks, depending on how long the Advent and Christmas seasons are. The Gospel readings at Mass during Ordinary Time generally describe the public ministry of Jesus from the time of His Baptism to the final confrontation with dark powers that led to His Crucifixion and then Resurrection. And there is a focus on the steady, ordered growth of the Christian life, both for each person and for the whole Church.

- B. Within the seasons the Church also sets aside special days for saints and the great events of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Church.
1. The highest of all days in the Church year are those of the Easter Triduum, the time from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday. On these days, we celebrate the central events of all of history: the death of Christ on Good Friday, His time among the dead on Holy Saturday, and His glorious Resurrection on Easter Sunday. These greatest of events are commemorated and made present in the Eucharist and the Mass, which were established at the Last Supper that we celebrate on Holy Thursday night.
  2. Next in line are the solemnities, glorious days of celebration and prayer. There are sixteen solemnities on the universal calendar, of which the highest are: Christmas, Epiphany (celebrating the arrival of the Magi before Jesus), the Ascension, which occurs on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of Easter, and Pentecost, which closes out the Easter season 10 days later. The other twelve universal solemnities are the celebrations of: Mary, the Mother of God (January 1); St. Joseph (March 19); the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary and the Incarnation of Christ (March 25); the Holy Trinity; Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Eucharist; the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the last three of which occur during the three weeks after Pentecost); the birth of John the Baptist (June 24); Saints Peter and Paul (June 29); the Assumption of Mary into heaven (August 15); All Saints' Day (November 1); Christ the King (the last Sunday before Advent); and the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8.) In addition, the memorial days for the main patron saint of a country, parish or religious order can be elevated to a solemnity for that parish or order. Thus, for example, the day for St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher ((June 22) is a solemnity in the Cathedral for the Arlington Diocese; and the saint's days for St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare of Assisi (October 4 and August 11) are celebrated as a solemnity in the Franciscans Order.
  3. The next highest day is a feast day, which celebrates a particularly prominent saint or event in the life of Christ, Mary or the Church. Thus, for example, the days for all of the Apostles, some of the earliest martyrs, and the archangels are feasts, as are celebrations the Presentation, Baptism and Transfiguration of Christ, the Birth of Mary, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the conversion of St. Paul and the dedication of the major basilicas in Rome. The day for the patron saint or saints of a diocese, an area or a religious order, or the anniversary of the dedication of a diocese's cathedral, can be a feast day. Thus, for example, Saints Thomas More and Elizabeth Ann Seton are the patrons for the Diocese of Arlington and thus their days (June 22 and January 4) can be celebrated as feasts in this diocese.
  4. Most saints' days are memorials, as are the days for such devotions as the Immaculate Heart of Mary or the Rosary. However, if a saints' day occurs during the holy seasons of Advent or Lent, it is combined with the theme for that season and called a commemoration. Memorials can be obligatory or optional. If a

memorial is obligatory, Masses and other liturgies of that day usually must celebrate that saint or devotion, with exceptions such as weddings, Confirmations, or funerals. If a memorial is optional it may be celebrated. In addition to memorials on the general calendar, specific places have memorials for special saints or people who have been declared blessed (one step before being declared a saint.) Thus, for example, in the United States, we celebrate the memorials of Saint John Neumann, an early archbishop of Philadelphia and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, a native American convert honored as the Lily of the Mohawks, on January 5 and July 14 respectively.

C. The liturgical color for a day or season is used for the priest's vestments and often for such other purposes as one of the altar cloths, Church decorations, and the vesture of people assisting in the liturgy. In the Latin rite that we are used to, there are four primary liturgical colors, violet, white (or gold), red and green, and two secondary colors, rose and black.

1. Violet is the color for Advent, Lent, other occasions of penance and quiet reflection such as the sacrament of Reconciliation and sometimes funerals.
  - a. For Lent, the color represents such themes as repentance from sins, somber reflection on our longing for the greater kingdom, and the desire to share in love with Jesus in His suffering for our sake.
  - b. For Advent, there is also a notion of penance and longing, but also combined with violet as the ancient symbol of royalty, the color that kings and queens used to wear. For in Advent, we reflect upon the ancient Jews' longing for the promised Messiah (the anointed one) and our longing for Jesus who is King of heaven and earth.
  - c. These two seemingly very different meanings are joined in Jesus Christ. For He suffered on Calvary and so won a kingdom, both for His own human nature and for each of us. Likewise, it is precisely by repenting of sins and joining in the suffering of Christ that we share in His kingdom. See, e.g., Phil 2:5-11.
  - d. Violet may also be used at funerals and other Masses for the dead, symbolizing the mourning at death, and the confidence that through penance we can assist the dead in arriving in His everlasting kingdom.
2. The color white reflects glory, joy, holiness and purity.
  - a. It is thus the color for the Christmas season, when we celebrate the birth of Christ and His early life, and of the Easter season, a time of rejoicing at His Resurrection and presence with us.
  - b. It is also the color of glorious days such as the solemnities of Corpus Christi (the Eucharist) and Trinity and is used for the days of angels and of saints who did not die as martyrs. For saints and angels, it symbolizes their heroic sanctity and glory now in heaven.

- c. As the symbol of joy, white is also the usual color for such festive occasions as weddings, baptisms, ordinations, graduations, and the blessings of people, churches and liturgical treasures, or anything that is helpful.
  - d. Because Mary is the queen of heaven and earth, white is the color for Marian days and events associated with Mary, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Marian vestments are white with the addition of blue for her in particular.
  - e. White can also be the color for funerals, reflecting hope in the resurrection.
  - f. For particularly high days or events, such as Christmas and Easter, gold can be the main color, or combined with white, to show even greater glory.
3. Red is the color for the Holy Spirit and for martyrs, those who died for the faith.
- a. Red symbolizes the spiritual fire of the Holy Spirit and is thus the color for Confirmations and for Pentecost, when Christ sent the Holy Spirit upon Mary, the Apostles and other early Christians ten days after the Ascension.
  - b. For martyrs, red symbolizes their courage and the blood they shed for the faith, sacrifices that consecrated their lives and their lands for Christ.
  - c. For both the celebration of the Holy Spirit and the martyrs, red also represents the fire of charity that should inspire all Christians.
4. Green is the color for Ordinary Time, and represents hope and steady, regular growth, such as that of the fields and trees. As the color of hope, green reflects the recognition that this life is meant to be the springtime of everlasting life. As the color of the fields, green reminds us to dedicate our lives and the world around us as vineyards of the Lord, producing fruit worthy of everlasting life. See Luke 3:8; Catechism 755. Thus, during ordinary time, the color green is generally used for priest's vestments and often other adornments, unless the day is a solemnity, feast or memorial, in which case white or red would be the usual color.
5. In addition to the central colors for the liturgical year, the church sometimes uses rose or black.
- a. Rose is a color that combines purple, red and white. It thus symbolizes Christian longing, courage and joy together. The Church uses the rose color on two Sundays, Gaudete Sunday and Laetare Sunday. Gaudete is a

Latin term that means “Rejoice” with the connotation of gaining what one has longed for. And Gaudete Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent, a Sunday that focuses on the preliminary joy that we experience even now awaiting Christ, even as there is a poignant sense of longing. Laetare also means “Rejoice,” with an additional connotation of having overcome some sorrow of struggle. And Laetare Sunday is the fourth Sunday of Lent, during which we anticipate the joy of having overcome the sorrows and struggles against sin in a fallen world, seeing that the redemption of the world and ourselves is near at hand.

b. Reflecting sorrow and mourning at loss is the color black. It can be used on Good Friday, funerals and other Masses for the dead. In such cases, this color symbolizes sorrow at death as Blessed Virgin Mary and the women of Jerusalem felt at the Cross, as Jesus felt at the death of Lazarus, and as we feel at the parting of a loved one. See Luke 23:26-32; John 11:35, 19:25-27. There is an old Jewish saying, “Sorrow at death is a sign of love during life.” And we are willing to risk that sorrow here on earth for the sake of love. Such noble sorrow will be rewarded in a kingdom where the desires of all rightful loves are fulfilled. As Jesus said, “blessed are those who weep and mourn, for one day they will laugh.” Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21.