

Catechesis on the Mass

A Homily Series

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Given at Saint Andrew the Apostle Parish

August 2009

Overview of the Mass (homily originally given August 2, 2009)

Last week, we began hearing from what is called the “Bread of Life Discourse” in John’s Gospel. Every three years – in Cycle B of the readings – we are given this discourse from Jesus about the “bread from heaven.” This series of readings goes on for 5 weeks – so even the liturgical books which help us prepare for Mass tell us priests to be careful about “saying everything you know about the Eucharist on the first week – you’ve got four more to go!” It also mentions that it may be a good time to do a series of homilies about the Mass. I find this a good thing to do – to take a slow walk through the Mass and explain at least SOME of what we do in Mass, and why.

I guess we begin with simply coming to Mass. In the Gospel today, the crowd, having been fed with only a few barley loaves and fish, follow Jesus – they realize that he’s left them and they get into their boats searching for Him. This is probably the first point when it comes to the Mass – WE HAVE TO COME. Jesus has SO MUCH to offer us at every Mass – but we must come to Him in order to receive. It is not enough for us to stay at home and pray. If we want to be fed by Christ – we need to come here – to Mass – and thus the *obligation* to attend Mass each and every Sunday – without exception. Willingly choosing not to attend Mass on Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation is turning our backs on God – and still constitutes a mortal sin.

And how do we come to Mass? Prepared. This means that we’ve, hopefully, read the readings *before* we get to Mass. It means we’ve fasted one hour in order to experience a physical hunger – reminding us of our spiritual hunger – for the Eucharist. It means that we dress appropriately – as if we are going to something important – not to the beach or pool or picnic. We’d never show up at a job interview dressed as if we were going swimming, nor should we dress this way for Church on Sunday.

Granted, this is a balancing act. Yes, the important thing is that you come, and Jesus doesn’t care what you’re wearing – BUT, what you wear says something, not about Jesus, but about YOU – it says how important this is to YOU – how much emphasis you put on this in your own life. Sure, Jesus will welcome you no matter what you’re wearing, but like mom always said, I hope I’m wearing respectable clothes (and clean underwear) at the time... If even Hersheypark has a dress code for people – shouldn’t we be careful with the way we dress for Mass?

We must also come to Mass not expecting to be entertained or to “get anything out of it.” This is a common complaint – “I don’t go to Mass anymore because I don’t get anything out of it.” You don’t come to get, but to GIVE.

- We come to Mass to give ourselves to Christ
- we come to Mass not to be entertained, but to WORK
 - to be always struggling to be attentive and listen
 - to give ourselves to Christ and to others
 - to be challenged and to review and evaluate our own lives
 - to pray for ourselves and those we love and care about
 - to learn the truths of our faith and of Church teaching

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (cf 2182), at Mass – the people of God are called together into unity to celebrate the memorial of the Lord or the Eucharistic Sacrifice. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.” Christ is really present – in the assembly, in the person of the minister; in His word, in the Eucharistic species.

The Mass is really divided into 2 main parts:

- Liturgy of the Word
- the Liturgy of the Eucharist

but these two together make up one, single act of worship. In the Mass, the table of God’s word and of Christ’s Body is laid for the people of God to receive from it instruction and food.

And how do we begin Mass? Singing. We sometimes fail to recognize the importance of singing. It is more than just “traveling music,” but uniting our voices in song:

- gathers us together in song, creating a unity – one voice from many voices – praising God’s goodness.
- Our songs actually are prayers – remember what St. Augustine said: “He who sings, prays twice.”
- Our songs also tell “stories” – if we only listen to the words of the songs, we hear salvation history recounted to us – we hear the scriptures – we hear of God’s work in our midst.

It doesn’t matter that you can’t sing – that you don’t have a nice voice – God gave you that voice – give it back to Him!

One of the things we Catholics are famous for is what I call “stand-up, sit-down, fight, fight, fight!” We move around a lot – sitting, standing, kneeling, processing, bowing... All these Movements & gestures & postures all have meaning – they make our celebration shine with dignity and noble simplicity.

There is an importance to the **unity of our posture** – much like our singing, it becomes another sign of our unity and oneness. And so, for example, the Bishops of the United States have asked us to make a common sign of reverence before receiving Holy Communion – a simple bow before the Eucharist. All of us doing the same thing is another sign of our unity.

There are other moments when posture & gestures speak: like during the “Confiteor” as we “strike our breast”; or during the Creed, when we bow at the words speaking of the incarnation. All these postures and gestures – have meaning and are not just empty ritual.

Even **Silence** plays an important role at Mass – as you enter and leave church – to provide an atmosphere of prayer. Which is why, I suppose, that Fr. D always had that reminder in the bulletin that “This is holy ground – Silence encourages a spirit of prayer.” Reminding us that, both before AND after Mass – we should maintain a reverent silence in God’s house – to foster a spirit of reverence and prayer.

OK – enough introduction and background, let’s **walk through the Mass one part at a time** (don’t worry, we’re not doing the *entire* Mass today)...

As soon as we come into the church – what do we do? We dip our hands in holy water and make the sign of the cross. Why? To remind us of our baptism – when we were traced with the sign of the cross, when we were washed clean of sin. We sign ourselves with holy water asking God to cleanse us of our sins – and as a mini-rite of purification – preparation for what we are about to celebrate during the Mass.

Then we genuflect – to what? To Christ, present in the Eucharist in the Tabernacle. Have any of you ever walked into the movie theater and done this... How embarrassing – but it reminds us that this genuflection ought not just be a habit – but an acknowledgement of Christ present in the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle.

Then we come in and, most of us, kneel down and pray. We carry so many burdens and needs with us. We kneel or sit in silence and bring these to God in our prayers.

The Entrance Rites

Then, the Entrance song begins. This opens the celebration (and as I said, it's not to get the priest from point A to point B). Our entrance song:

- intensifies the unity of those assembles
- lead thoughts to the mystery of the season or feast
- accompany procession

During the procession, the lector carries the Book of Gospels and places it on the altar – reminding us that God's Word is also a food that sustains us: that we are fed at the Table of God's Word as well as at the Table of the Eucharist.

The priest then venerates the Altar with a kiss. Isn't this a strange thing? But it is a recognition of Christ's presence in our midst. Remember how Fr. D. stressed how we should show proper signs of reverence for the altar? That's because the altar is a sign and symbol of Christ's presence here with us – of His Sacrifice offered daily here in our midst. The priest kisses the altar as an act of veneration of Christ in our midst.

“And with your spirit...”

Then the priest arrives at the chair and, after the sign of the cross, greets the people and introduces the Mass of day. Here, you are very soon going to discover a *drastic* change in translation. For nearly 10 years, we have been working on a new English translation of the Mass – which the Church presents to us in Latin. Each language group must then translate the Latin into their own language – and this translation must be approved by the Holy See. It has been a LONG and sometimes difficult process – but it appears that it is nearing completion. In fact, there are lots of resources for you on the US Bishops website (check the bulletin).

Anyway – you're going to notice really fast that we won't be answering Father with “and also with you” for very much longer. When the new translations are approved and published, the new response will be “and with your spirit.” There are LOTS of reasons for this... and I invite you to do your own research on the Bishop's website where they explain in great detail – I can't do much in a 15 minutes homily.

Why the change? Simply, it is a more accurate translation of the Latin – English is the only major language that does NOT respond “and with your spirit.” In addition, this reference to the spirit – in the response to the priest – is a recognition of the “Spirit” he received at his ordination – an acknowledgement of the special and unique way in which a priest is configured to Christ – he's not just an ordinary guy up there (and also with you), but a man configured by the Holy Spirit in such a way that he can stand in the very person of Christ (and with your spirit). You can do your own research into this...but that's the short version.

Then, we begin the Penitential Rite (or Sprinkling with water)

- penitential rite – black women in Louisiana. Miss Mabel – winning the lottery – responds “Lord, have mercy.” Statements of God's mercy, not “woe is me.”
- OR Sprinkling – remember baptism

Gloria – sung by all – ancient hymn in which the Church, called and gathered together by the Holy Spirit, praises and entreats God the Father & the Lamb.

- sung on Sundays outside Lent & Advent.

Then, the Opening Prayer – or Collect – gathering people’s prayers into one. Silence to pray. Let us pray... Not just a cue for the server to bring over the book – but a “command” of sorts – calling us to gather our own prayers – which are “collected” by the priest and offered to God in one prayer.

Overview of the Entrance Rites:

The Mass is FILLED with meaning and symbolism which is meant to draw our hearts to God – to open our hearts to hear God’s Word – to be fed in body and soul. As we continue the Bread of Life discourse, we’ll continue our exploration into the Mass.

Perhaps today – hearing about the introductory rites of the Mass – we can examine in our own lives how we prepare for Mass – in dress, in attitude, in action... Just as we prepare for an important occasion in life – may we always prepare with diligence for the greatest event in all of history – the weekly celebration of Christ’s Sacrifice on the cross – the Sacrifice which offers salvation to the whole world – if we are well prepared to receive it.

The Liturgy of the Word (homily originally given August 9, 2009)

Continuing our “walk through the Mass,” in this weekend’s Gospel, Jesus tells the Jews, “It is written in the prophets: *They shall all be taught by God.* Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.” How do we listen to the Lord? There’s a saying from some saint (I’m just not good at knowing who said what, my apologies), the saint said, “When you pray, you speak to God. When you read the Scriptures, God speaks to you.”

The Sacred Scriptures, the Bible, are such an important way in which we listen to God’s voice. And that’s where we are in our exploration of the Mass – at the Liturgy of the Word.

As Catholics, we are often accused by others of being “anti-Scriptural.” They will say that we distort the Bible – or sometimes even totally ignore what it says. Some say that the Catholic Church “discourages” her members from reading the Bible – and they say the reason is because if people read the truth found in the Bible, they’d leave the Church. Well, none of this could be farther from the truth!

Remember the change in translation we spoke about last week? Another part of the reason for the new translation is so that the Scriptural quotes (which are all through the Mass) will be more obvious and evident to us. Let me give you just one example: before Communion, the priest says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – happy are those who are called to his supper.” The NEW translation will be, “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb” – directly quoting Revelation, “Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb’” (Rev. 19:9). This new translation makes a clearer connection to Scripture and to the reality that the Eucharist is a “foretaste of the heavenly banquet – the wedding feast of the Lamb.”

Then, the people respond: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” But soon, that translation will become, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” Now, with this translation – we hear the exchange between Jesus and the Centurion from Luke’s Gospel: Jesus goes with him to heal his sick servant, “...but (quoting the Scriptures) when He was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you, but say the word and let my servant be healed” (Lk 7:6-7). Now we hear the Scriptures – and maybe just knowing this context will give you an entirely different insight into what we say there, and why...

If you really listen to the Mass – you will hear Sacred Scripture quoted over and over! The Mass is FILLED with Scripture – and our new translation will make that even more obvious.

Interpretation of the Scriptures: But the other thing people say is that the Catholic Church discourages people from reading the Bible. The issue here is not reading the Bible, but interpretation of what we read there. The ONLY interpreter of the Scriptures, God’s Divinely revealed Word, is the Holy Spirit – no individual person. This is often why new Protestant churches spring up in every abandoned store-front – because someone didn’t like one pastor’s interpretation, and so founded their own church. As Catholics, I assure you that not one of your priests interprets the Scriptures on his own (or it shouldn’t be) – it is the CHURCH which officially interprets the Scriptures in the light of several things:

1. The Entire Bible – We have to be attentive to the content and unity of the entire Bible. Although the books of the Bible may seem very different – they are part of the single revelation of God which culminates in Christ – and so they all must be taken into account when trying to understand what the Spirit is saying through the Bible.
2. We need to read the Bible within the “living tradition of the entire Church.”
3. We must be conscious of how the various Truths revealed are interconnected in the Scriptures.

We all should be reading the Bible daily, but we must recognize that what the Bible says to you today is God speaking to YOU – it is not an “official” interpretation – but what God knows you need to hear today.

In fact, there are different **“senses” of Scripture:**

1. The Literal Sense: that what the Bible says is *literally* true. But, this isn’t always the case – some parts of the Bible are NOT meant to be literal. When reading the Bible, we need to be asking ourselves some questions: who wrote it, when did they write it, to whom did they write it and what did they write it for. This will help us understand if this section of the Bible is intended to be literal or not. Is Genesis a truly “historical” (as we understand history) account of how creation happened? No. It was written in a way to tell a TRUTH – that God created everything – but not necessarily exactly HOW that came about. The Genesis account of creation is literally true, but not meant to be taken literally. Get it?
2. The Allegorical Sense – tells us how things, events or even people in the literal sense actually point to Jesus and the Paschal Mystery – His suffering, death & resurrection. How Isaac and Abraham point, with remarkable similarity, to Jesus crucifixion on Mount Calvary.
3. The Moral Sense – how the literal sense points to how the Christian lives his/her life in this world. The Scriptures do indeed teach us of the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman, about proper use of our sexuality, about how to treat the poor and destitute.
4. The Anagogical Sense – how the literal sense points to the heavenly destiny of each Christian – and to the 4 last things (death, judgment, heaven & hell)

Some people who attack us Catholics often “proof text,” they take one line of Scripture out of context and “beat us over the head with it.” But, as we see, this is not an authentic way to interpret Scripture. Example, “You Catholics call your priests Father, ‘Call no man on earth father.’” Yep, the Bible says that. But in context, the Old Testament reveals that this does not include your biological father, nor does it include your ancestors (ie our father, David). What Jesus is talking about is the ultimate Father – who is our ultimate teacher or father (giver of life)? Some person on earth – or God? Who founded your religion? Jesus – or Martin Luther? Who gives you your source of truth? The Church and Sacred Tradition – or the US Constitution? Put that way, it causes us to really think through a lot things. Who (or what) is our ultimate authority, teacher and giver of life?

Anyway, I’ve greatly digressed from the Mass – to do a little introduction to the Scriptures. Let’s get back to what happens directly at Mass.

The Liturgy of the Word: Following the Opening Prayer – or the collect – where the priest “gathers” or collects our prayers together and offers them to God, we sit down to listen. Here, our posture again says

something. We sit – acknowledging our more lowly position than God – we sit to listen to Him as He speaks to us through the Scriptures. Our posture of sitting is a sign and symbol of our attentive listening.

Now, I know many people really like the Missalettes with the readings in them – and they truly are a great help to people who have hearing problems. But, we really ought not be “following along” in the Bible. The Scriptures are “God’s Word.” Words are spoken, not really written – and so we do much better to *listen* to the Scriptures as they are proclaimed – rather than follow along in the book. Besides the fact – at the first Mass each weekend I learn really fast where the page turn is in the Missalette: “And Jesus said to His disciples...[pages turning]... I have to wait while everyone turns the page. Maybe reading them before hand – as part of our preparation we spoke about last week, will help us be prepared to listen to God’s word proclaimed at Mass.

So, we’ve entered the Liturgy of the Word – one of the 2 main parts of the Mass. In the readings: God himself speaks to his people & Christ, the Good News, is proclaimed in the Gospel.

- must be listened to by all with reverence
- here the table of God’s word is laid for the faithful and the riches of the Bible are opened to us.
- All readings from ambo.
- Readings done by reader – Gospel by deacon or priest.
- Gospel – the greatest veneration must be shown to it – setting it off from the other readings by special marks of honor.
- It is honored in these ways:
 - o By the minister appointed to proclaim it (priest or deacon) who prepares himself by prayer “May the Lord be in my heart and on my lips, that I might worthily proclaim His Holy Gospel”
 - o By faithful who make acclamation “Alleluia”
 - Who stand to listen to it – just as you stand when someone important enters the room – Jesus speaks to us – we stand out of reverence.
 - o Marks of reverence to Book of Gospels (incense, candles, procession, kiss at conclusion – “may the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins;” being enshrined)
 - o And we do this (cross on forehead, lips & heart). Why? Asking that God’s word take root in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts. It is a silent prayer we all make before listening to the Gospel – to Jesus’ words to us.

Did you know that there is a 3-year Sunday cycle of readings? We simply call them Cycles A, B and C. But each year focuses on a particular Gospel: Cycle A = Matthew; Cycle B = Mark (and John – because Mark is so short); Cycle C – Luke.

In addition, the other readings also change in each cycle. Do you know the general set up of the readings?

1st reading – always from the Old Testament (except during Easter when it is from Acts or Revelation). For Sundays, it is always chosen in relation to the Gospel – to make a connection between Old and New Testaments.

2nd reading – from the Epistles – letters. These are continuous readings from, usually, Saint Paul’s letters to the various churches – at Rome or in Corinth or in Thessalonica.

I’ve mentioned how there is a different Gospel for each of the 3 cycles – normally they are read in a continuous way – but there is sometimes some “jumping around.”

On weekdays, the readings are continuous – starting in one book and continuing until its finished. There are 2 weekday cycles – so that the first reading is different each year – while the Gospel is the same.

With all these cycles of readings, did you know that we would hear all of the New Testament and a significant portion of the Old Testament. Now, tell me the Church is anti-Scripture and doesn't want her people to know the Bible.

Following the Gospel, the priest or deacon gives **the Homily** – to break open God's word – to apply it to today. The homily is not to entertain – but it certainly should grab your attention (or you won't hear any of it). Normally it is based on the readings of the day – but from time to time, there may be a particular celebration (like NFP Awareness last week, or Catechetical Sunday) that pulls our attention from the Sunday readings. Sometimes the homily will be an opportunity to teach about a particular tenet of our faith or to explain something that we, as Catholics, believe or practice (like Anointing of the Sick that Fr. Clark did while I was away). On weekdays, the priest may speak more about the saint of the day rather than the readings. But regardless, here, God's Word is "broken open" and, hopefully, it is made relevant to our lives, to our culture, to the days events and happenings.

Someone once said, "the only sources you need to preach on Sunday is the Bible and the newspaper." That's pretty true – so homily preparation involves much more than just research into the text, but includes applying the text to the events in the world today – to make it relevant to our lives. I always try to do this – to provide some challenge – to spur you on to victory – to tell why the Eucharist is truly our "bread from heaven" which fulfills every desire and helps us persevere in the contest of faith.

Remember those periods of silence through the Mass – giving us a moment to recollect – to ponder – to reflect – TO LISTEN TO GOD'S VOICE speaking to us in our hearts. These moments are important. No, Father hasn't "fallen asleep" during the readings or after communion – he's allowing for that silence so that we can reflect and pray.

Then together we make the **Profession of faith** – a response to God's word – so that the great mysteries of our faith may be recalled and confirmed before the celebration of the Eucharist. Here is another part of the Mass where the translation will be changing – slightly. We'll all have to learn it together – but again, the reason for the change is so that we are more faithful to the Latin – and thus present a more theologically accurate and, sometimes, poetic and beautiful prayer. During the creed there is a "posture directive" – all bow during the words, "by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man." Why? This is an ancient gesture which shows humility and mystery. When you didn't know the answer to a question, you bowed before the person asking, acknowledging that you didn't know the answer. How does God take flesh? We don't know the answer to exactly HOW that happens, and so, when we speak of the incarnation, we bow – acknowledging the mystery.

The **General Intercessions** are a response to God's word which has been welcomed in faith

- a way the people exercise their baptismal priesthood – offering prayers to the Father for the Salvation of all.
- In general, there must always be these four intentions:
 - o For the Church
 - o For worldly leaders
 - o For this community and her needs
 - o For the sick, suffering
 - We respond to each intercession, asking God to hear us. The response can vary – as you've done in the past. I prefer some stability here in using the same response *almost* all the time: "Lord, hear our prayer." I know I always get stressed out about, "what was the response?" when it changes every week – so this helps us pray, not stress. So from now on, the response is, "Lord, hear our prayer." So, starting today, I don't need to announce that anymore. Right?

- So, those are the 4 general intercessions, but as you know, we often add others – for vocations, for respect for life, for our own personal needs “in silence.”
- However, as you know, we often add others – for vocations, for respect for life, for our own personal needs “in silence.”
- I know each priest deals with this differently – I like to announce the intention of the Mass saying “especially for _____ whom we remember in a special way at this Mass.” Mass can be offered for, and the fruits and graces of the Mass applied to both the living and also to the dead who are undergoing their purification in purgatory. This is what this is all about – someone has asked that a loved one, living or dead, be remembered at Mass so that the many graces of the Mass might be applied to them – to aid their entrance into heaven from purgatory – or to aid them in their trials and struggles here on earth. I think many of us have forgotten that we can ask to have Mass offered for people – but it is a good and holy practice that we should really work to revive. Want to offer a special gift – want to offer consolation to someone? Have a Mass offered for them! Regina takes care of this in the parish office.

That concludes the Liturgy of the Word, so we’ll stop there for today – but over the next two weeks, we’ll look in detail at the rest of the Mass.

But, for today, remember that the Mass is FILLED with Scriptural references – and during the Mass, God wants to speak to us as the Scriptures are proclaimed – but we have to be paying attention to hear Him speak. God’s word is effective and alive – “cutting between bone and marrow.” May the proclamation of God’s Word always challenge and encourage us – calling us to live the life God desires of us here on earth – that we can, one day, come to the “wedding feast of the Lamb.”

I promise you that, during the Liturgy of the Word, God will speak to you – if you come ready to listen...

The Liturgy of the Eucharist (homily originally given August 16, 2009)

In the Gospel this weekend, continuing the “Bread of Life Discourse,” The Jews quarrel: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” But Jesus doesn’t back down from his statement, he doesn’t try to correct their misunderstanding, but he emphasizes, “Amen, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you do not have life within you.”

Unless we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood – we do not have life within us! Wow! Remember how I mentioned that the first point about Mass is that we come... that missing Mass on purpose was still a mortal sin, how we can’t just sit at home or in nature and pray and think that substitutes for Mass? This is why! “Unless you eat my Flesh and drink my Blood, you do not have life within you!”

This is where we are in our explanation of the Mass - the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

- here, the Church says, we come to the source & summit of our faith.
- At the Last Supper Christ instituted this sacrifice and paschal meal so that the sacrifice of the cross be continuously present in the Church.
- When the priest, in the person of Christ the Lord, carries out what the Lord did and handed over to his disciples to do in his memory – It is a re-presentation (NOT representation, a RE-presentation) of the events of Calvary.
- Christ took the bread and the cup and gave thanks; he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying: “Take, eat, and drink: this is my body; this is the cup of my blood. Do this in memory of me.” Accordingly, the Church has planned the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy around the parts corresponding to these words and actions of Christ.

After our Profession of Faith in the Creed, we prepare for the Liturgy of the Eucharist by gathering together and offering our gifts to God:

- In the preparation of the gifts, the bread and wine are brought to the altar – that is, the same elements Christ took into his hands.

Realize – we haven't done & don't do some of this... yet – and won't until the beginning of September when all have been trained.

PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS & ALTAR

- As the offertory hymn begins, the altar, the Lord's table, which is the center of the whole Eucharistic liturgy, is prepared by the servers, seminarian and/or deacon (when we have one from the Mount)
- It starts with the collection of our gifts to God: our sacrificial offering through the collection. Soon, we'll be adjusting this part of the Mass a bit so that these, our gifts, are also brought forward at the offertory and offered to God – our financial contributions are also our “sacrifice” to God – we should acknowledge that in our liturgy as well – by bringing them forward to be received at the altar.
 - o You know why we use those baskets you pass instead of the ones on a stick? Because this is an action which requires my participation – not just a “drop” in the basket. Passing the basket is not so that I can “make change” as it goes by, but so that I can participate in this offering by “passing the basket along” after I've placed my own, sacrificial offering in the basket.
 - o Also brought forward are the bread and wine which will be offered to God and will be transformed into His Body and Blood – on which we feast in order to have life.
 - o These are our offerings – simple bread & wine, monetary gifts of thanksgiving and gratitude to God – simple gifts which God transforms.
- Music here covers the action – it might be the congregation singing a hymn or song, sometimes it is a solo or the choir.
- When the bread and wine have been brought forward, they are taken to the altar – where the server waits with them until the priest arrives and takes them. The bread & wine are placed on the altar by PRIEST – no one else – this was something emphasized in the 2000 revisions to the Roman Missal.
- It is a sign and symbol that in the sacrifice which is offered – it is the priest, in the person of Christ, who offers the sacrifice – therefore he must offer it and place it on the altar – no one else.
- The priest then mixes water & wine – and there is a silent prayer that the priest says here: listen to this... it says so much:
 - o By the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.
 - o Water and wine are mixed – just as, in some mysterious way, God took flesh in Christ – sharing our humanity – so that he could offer Himself on the Cross – give us this Eucharist – so that we, by eating His Body and Blood – could share in His divinity. It's a profound prayer that might require us to meditate a bit on it in order to understand what it's saying.
- These gifts of bread and wine may then be incensed as a symbol of the Church's offering and prayer going up like incense, in the sight of God. At this point, he may also incense:
 - o the altar,
 - o The cross (that's what we're incensing when we stand at the center and “aim” the incense upward),
 - o The priest (on account of his sacred ministry) and
 - o the people (because of their baptismal dignity).

Let's talk a little bit about incense. I recognize that we live in a culture in which we are very sensitive to smoke – desiring to have “smoke-free environments” for our health. I also recognize that some people do have terrible respiratory problems which make them very sensitive to some stimuli. However, and I haven't seen this here yet, so I'm not addressing anyone here in particular, but...

Much of people's coughing and hacking and reaction to incense in the church is psycho-somatic. We see the thurible – and we start to cough. Know how I can say this? One time the server failed to light the charcoal (which makes the incense burn and smoke). Lest the poor server look fooling for having brought it out to me for no reason, I went through the motions of putting incense in it and swinging it around – now remember, there's no fire and no smoke.

No sooner had I started imposing incense than the coughs began – IT WASN'T ON FIRE! THERE WAS NO SMOKE! THERE WAS NOTHING HAPPENING! But somehow, some people's brains saw incense, and said, "react."

Again, I do not intend to speak disparagingly of people who truly do have respiratory problems and who have reactions to the incense, but it's my very strong suspicion that most of us really don't. It's just a reaction we have to seeing smoke. We also try to purchase incense which is, "hypo allergenic" – so that the aroma is not too overpowering for people.

OK, so, where does our use of incense come from? In the ancient world, using incense, especially in religious rites, was very common. In Judaism, the Lord instructed Moses to build a golden altar for the burning of incense (cf. Exodus 30:1-10), which was placed in front of the veil to the entrance of the meeting tent where the ark of the covenant was kept – and that altar of incense burned constantly in the Temple in Jerusalem.

When incense was introduced into the Mass we really don't know. But at the time of the early Church, the Jews were still using incense in the Temple, so it would be safe to conclude that the Christians would probably have adapted its usage for their own rituals

The smoke symbolizes the prayers of the faithful drifting up to heaven: the Psalmist prays, "Let my prayer come like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141).

Incense also creates the ambiance of heaven: The Book of Revelation describes the heavenly worship as follows: "Another angel came in holding a censer of gold. He took his place at the altar of incense and was given large amounts of incense to deposit on the altar of gold in front of the throne, together with the prayers of all God's holy ones. From the angel's hand, the smoke of the incense went up before God, and with it the prayers of God's people." There's a priest/church joke that goes, "Mass wasn't a success if you can still see the altar through the smoke."

Why do we use incense at some Mass's and not at others? The use of incense is totally optional. It *may* be used during the entrance procession; at the beginning of Mass, to incense the altar; at the procession and proclamation of the Gospel; at the offertory, to incense the offerings, altar, priest and people; and at the elevation of the Sacred Host and chalice of Precious Blood after the consecration – and we can pick and choose from among these. The priest may also incense the Crucifix and the Paschal Candle (during Easter) – or even a statue or relic or image of a saint on their feast day. During a funeral Masses, the priest, at the final commendation, often incenses the coffin, both as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased which, at baptism, became the temple of the Holy Spirit, and also as a sign of our prayers for the deceased rising to God.

Really, using incense at Mass simply adds a **sense of solemnity and mystery to the Mass**. The visual imagery of the smoke and the smell remind us of the transcendence of the Mass which links heaven with earth, and allow us to enter into the presence of God.

- After the incense, father washes his hands – expression of his desire to be cleansed internally to offer this sacrifice worthily – "Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me of my sins."

PRAYER OVER THE GIFTS

- Then there is the invitation to pray: – there is LOTS of confusion here. When do we stand up? Isn't that the question? "Pray, friends, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father. May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands..." When are we *supposed* to stand up here?
- Well, there is a clear answer in the instructions to the Mass – and a different answer in every parish you go to. Some stand *before* the priest says, "Pray, friends..." Others stand when the people start to *respond*, "May the Lord accept this sacrifice..." Others still do it the old way and stand *after* that response of the people.
- What's the *right* way? The way we've been doing it. The instructions say, "The people rise and reply..." So, we rise and reply. I really believe that, while there is confusion because different parishes are standing at different places, eventually it'll get straightend out – so, till then – "rise and respond."
- Then the priest prays the Prayer over gifts – which always speaks of transforming, not only the gifts of bread and wine, but also transforming US to be more like Christ.

The EUCHARISTIC PRAYER – is the center of our prayer & praise. It is a prayer of thanksgiving & sanctification. There is NO WAY I can do justice in one homily – so here are the highlights.

- This is the part of the Mass where you will probably notice the most changes in translation. Again, the new texts are available on the Bishops website if you'd like to see them. You and I will both just have to get used to new words... it'll take some time.
- First, the priest invites people to lift up their hearts – he unites them with himself in the prayer; he address to God in the name of the entire community through Jesus & the Holy Spirit.
- The meaning of the prayer is that the entire congregation of the faithful joins itself to Christ in acknowledging the great things God has done and in offering the sacrifice.
 - o Then a Thanksgiving – in the preface – in which the central mystery of day/season is proclaimed
 - o And we respond, joining with the angels & saints (entire church), in the Holy, Holy... Did you know that every time we celebrate Mass the *entire* Church is present – the angels and saints are HERE – in this church, as we celebrate Mass. Think about that reality!
 - o In the midst of the Eucharistic prayer there is what is called the "Epiclesis" – in a special invocation, the Church calls on God's power – the power of the Holy Spirit – and asks that the gifts offered by human hands be consecrated, that is, become Christ's body & blood, and that the victim to be received in communion be the source of salvation for those who will partake.
 - o This happens when father extends his hands over the gifts – and it's when the servers ring the bells – to remind us of what is happening –that we are calling down the Holy Spirit on these gifts – it is, in a way, the "point of no return" of Mass – once we get here, we must conclude Mass.
 - o Then comes the Institution narrative & the consecration itself – in the words and actions of Christ, we celebrate the sacrifice He instituted at the Last Supper, when, under the appearance of bread & wine, he offered his body & blood, then gave them to his apostles to eat and drink & commanded them to do the same.
 - o Here you are going to notice a BIG change – "which will be shed for you and for ..." the new translation will say "many" not "all." Why? Let me just quote from the Bishop's study guide...

"The expression 'for many,' while remaining open to the inclusion of each human person, is reflective also of the fact that this salvation is not brought about in some mechanistic way, without one's own willing or participation; rather, the believer is invited to accept in faith the gift that is being offered and to receive the supernatural life that is given to those who participate in this mystery, living it out in their lives as well so as to be numbered among the 'many' to whom the text refers."

- o I think "for many" instead of "for all" just reminds us that God's life is offered to all – but we have to accept – all are invited, and many respond, but not all.

- Most of us probably say something silently here as the priest hold's up the host: My Lord and My God. St. Thomas' words when he believed, and put his hands into Jesus' side. We see bread & wine, but with Thomas, we believe that this truly has become "our Lord and our God."
- Immediately after the consecration is the Anamnesis – the remembering – the Church keeps this memorial by recalling especially his passion, resurrection & ascension. There are several options here, and right now we are using, "Lord, by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free. You are the savior of the world." But whichever one we use, we call to mind – we remember – the saving events of the Paschal Mystery.
- Then, there is an offering of the sacrifice to the Father – reminding us that in the Mass, the Church offers the spotless victim to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church's intention here is that the faithful – the people of God – not only offer this victim, but also that they learn to offer themselves, and so day by day to surrender themselves to and enter into an ever more complete union with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all.
- The rest of the Eucharistic prayer is a series of intercessions – making it clear that the Eucharist is celebrated in union with the whole Church and all its members, living and dead – and we pray for them all, our pope and bishop, those here offering the sacrifice, and those who have gone before us, "marked with the sign of faith."
- Then, the Eucharistic Prayer concludes with the final doxology – the praise of God is expressed
 - "Through Him, with Him, in Him, - who is the "Him?" Christ! Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,
 - In the unity of the Holy Spirit – none of this happens without the cooperation and power of the Holy Spirit.
 - All glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father – to whom is all of this offered? To whom did Jesus offer Himself on the Cross? To whom do we offer ourselves – in union with Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit – to the Father!
 - For ever and ever.
 - to which the people respond: Amen. Let it be so! Yes! It is the assent of the people to the entire Eucharistic prayer and brings it to a conclusion .

Now, our meal, our sacrifice is prepared – and in the Communion Rite (which we'll look at next week), we make our immediate preparations to receive this Bread of Life.

For this week think about what is really happening during the Eucharistic Prayer – the angels and the saints come here, to this altar, to worship Christ in the Holy Eucharist. The Sacrifice of the cross is re-presented to us – it is made present for us – so that, for all of time, we could stand at the very foot of Calvary – offering ourselves, together with Christ, to the Father.

Here is really where the "work" of the liturgy takes place. How well are you offering yourself to the Father, in union with Christ in the Eucharist? When the priest says, "This is my Body, this is my Blood" can you make those words your own – offering YOUR body and blood to God the Father... After all, that is the real work of the liturgy.

The Communion Rite (homily originally given August 23, 2009)

Boy, if I weren't doing this series of homilies – would I LOVE to deal with today's 2nd reading – wives should be subordinate to their husbands...husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the Church. But, alas, you'll have to wait until this reading comes up again - and it won't be for a while...

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord – we said in today’s psalm – and, in fact, we’ve been saying in the psalm for several weeks as we have heard from the Bread of Life Discourse in Saint John’s Gospel. Taste and see – this is where we are in our explanation of the Mass – the Communion Rite.

Once the Great Amen has been sung, ending the Eucharistic Prayer, we begin the Communion Rite – the rites that are the immediate preparation for the reception of Christ’s Body & Blood in Holy Communion.

The Communion Rite begins with the Our Father. Now, this prayer, this central prayer taught by Jesus Himself, has enough material on which to reflect for an entire lifetime. So, again, we’ll just cover some of the highlights.

- Here in the Lord’s Prayer we make a fervent petition for daily food, for which we, as Christians, mean the Eucharistic Bread – we also pray for purification from sin, so that what is holy may, in fact, be given to those who are holy. (Eastern Church – Holy things for the Holy).

Our Father, who art in heaven:

- We begin with the salutation “Father,” a great consolation: we are allowed to say ‘Father.’ We are allowed to say ‘Father,’ because the Son was our brother and has revealed the Father to us; because, thanks to what Christ has done, we have once more become children of God.”
- the Father appears as the source of all good, as the measure of the perfection of man – despite the poor examples of fathers that some people have here on earth, He is the perfect Father. The love that endures “to the end” (Jn 13:1), which the Lord fulfilled on the Cross in praying for his enemies, shows us the essence of the Father. He is this love. Because Jesus brings it to completion, he is entirely “Son,” and he invites us to become “sons” (and daughters) by following His example.

Hallowed be thy name: The first petition of the Our Father reminds us of the second commandment: Don’t use God’s Name in vain.

Thy kingdom come: With this petition, we are acknowledging first and foremost the primacy of God. Where God is absent, nothing can be good. Where God is not seen, we and the world fall to ruin. This is what the Lord means when he says to “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Mt 6:33). These words establish an order of priorities for human action, for how we ought to approach everyday life.

Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven: Two things are immediately clear from the words of this petition: 1. God has a will with and for us; and 2. the essence of “heaven” is that it is where God’s will is unswervingly done. The essence of heaven is oneness with God’s will, the oneness of will and truth. Earth becomes “heaven” when God’s will is done; and it is *merely* “earth,” (the opposite of heaven) when we fail to do God’s will.

Give us this day our daily bread: Although the Lord directs our eyes to the essential, to God, He also knows about and acknowledges our earthly needs. While he says to his disciples, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat” (Mt 6:25), he nevertheless invites us to pray for our food and thus to turn our care over to God.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us: The fifth petition of the Our Father presupposes a world in which there is trespass (or sin) —sins of one person in relation to another, sins in relation to God. Every instance of sin involves some kind of injury to truth and to love and is thus opposed to God, who is truth and love. With this petition, the Lord is telling us that the guilt of our sins (our trespasses) can be overcome only by forgiveness of others, not by retaliation. God is a god who forgives, because He loves His creatures; but forgiveness can only penetrate and become effective in one who is himself forgiving.

And lead us not into temptation: God certainly does not lead us into temptation. In fact, as Saint James tells us: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one” (Jas 1:13). When we pray this, we are saying to God: “I know that I need trials so that my nature can be purified. When you decide to send me these trials, when you give evil some room to maneuver, as you did with Job, then please remember that my strength goes only so far. Don’t overestimate my capacity. Don’t set too wide the boundaries within which I may be tempted, and be close to me with your protecting hand when it becomes too much for me.” When we pray the sixth petition of the Our Father, on one hand we must be ready to take upon ourselves the burden of trials in this life. On the other hand, the object of the petition is to ask God not to send us more than we can bear, not to let us slip from his hands.

But deliver us from evil: We come before the Father with the hope that is at the center of our faith: “Rescue, redeem, and free us!” In the final analysis, it is a plea for redemption.

As Catholics we do not add the doxology to the Our Father, "For Thine is the kingdom, power, and glory, forever and ever", simply because it is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew – the version of the Our Father that the Church adapted. Other communities adopted Saint Luke’s version. At the time of Vatican II, this final doxology was included in the Mass, but it is separated from the actual Our Father by the priests interjection: "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day..."

So, having explained what we pray – how do we pray?

- The priest invites the people to pray, and all sing/say the prayer together. It’s why we don’t allow the “Our Father” to be sung as a solo during weddings, for example.
- Posture – standing. Holding hands? Hands extended? Hands together? What are we to do?
 - Holding hands – a sign of people’s unity and oneness, but misplaced emphasis – the ultimate moment of our unity is in Holy Communion, not the our father – so, as nice as it can be to see a congregation hold hands, it’s a misplaced emphasis & symbol.
 - Hands extended – there was discussion among bishops that perhaps we invite all to use orans position. In the end, the Bishops decided to say nothing about hand position here. If you choose to extend hands in orans, this is OK – and ancient gesture of prayer & supplication, of surrender and trust.
 - If choose to stand with hands folded, OK.
 - Really there are no clear directions here – which leaves it to the individual to decide.
- **The Rite of Peace** – Following the Our Father, the priest adds a prayer addressed to Christ – the victim on the altar – Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles... – the prayer is addressed to Jesus and so this is why I speak to Him, present there – it just seems to make sense. We ask for Christ’s peace, for forgiveness, for unity in the Church & the entire human family.
- **Sign of peace** – the people express their communion with one another in the church & their mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament. “If your friend offends you, make peace with your friend before bringing your gift to the altar” we read in the Scriptures.
 - What is the sign of peace? The exact sign is established for each culture. Originally it was a KISS of peace – intimacy and true love. We Americans are too “stand-offish” for this, so we shake hands, families may hug or kiss, in seminary we knew who was a “hugger” & who wasn’t so the “huggers” sat together at Mass.
 - The priest is to extend the sign of peace to those who are nearest – not throughout the Church. So, priest, ministers ought not run up & down isles.
- **Fraction Rite**
 - The priest breaks the Eucharistic Bread & places it in various vessels and (if there is one, the deacon) prepares the cups. Why all this bother? Because there is great symbolism in having

only one paten of bread & bringing forward one pitcher of wine at the offertory – a sign and symbol of unity.

- The Breaking of the Bread is what the Early Church called the Eucharist – what Christ did at the Last Supper.
- The Lamb of God is sung during this action – to cover the action, to ask God’s mercy & for peace. The Lamb of God should continue until the action of Breaking the Bread is complete.
- The priest breaks the Sacred Bread, and places a piece in the Sacred Blood. I make a big gesture so all can see what I’m doing. Why?
 - Body separate from Blood = dead body. Body & Blood together = living sacrifice. Our sacrifice is not dead, but living.
- **Communion** – the priest prepares himself by a prayer, said quietly, that he may fruitfully receive Christ’s Body & Blood. (Here’s where I bow, then genuflect). During this, the people are to prepare themselves as well, praying silently.
- The priest then shows the people the Eucharistic Bread & Sacred Wine, and invites them to the Supper of the Lord.
 - Symbolism – Host & Chalice – why? Christ present in both. Showing only Host under-emphasizes Christ’s presence in Sacred Wine.
 - Behold the lamb of God (my pause)
- Together, all make an act of humility – “Lord, I am not worthy...” Recalling scripture – Centurion realized his unworthiness to have Christ come into his home and told him, “only say the word, and my daughter will be healed.” We know God need only say the word, and we will be healed. As I said before, this translation will soon change to make this Scriptural reference more obvious.
- As the priest receives Communion, the other ministers come forward to receive (this is the first time they approach the altar). They are to receive their vessels from the hands of the priest – not take them themselves – a sign of being fed by Hand of God. Jesus took bread, broke it, blessed it, and gave it to the disciples who gave it to the people. The symbolism here should be obvious.
- The rubrics say, “It is most desirable that the faithful receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated AT THAT MASS,” and that they partake of the chalice – so that all share in this sacrifice being celebrated here and now. So, since I first arrived, we’ve been trying to consecrate just what we need at each Mass – trying not go to the tabernacle unless absolutely necessary.
 - What does the priest or EMHC say as we distribute Holy Communion? “The Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ” - NOT the Body of Jesus! (speak of Fr. Carroll – it bloody well is not...). They should not use names, “Bill, the Body of Christ.”
 - To this, we respond, “Amen.” It is not a time to praise Jesus, but a time when, in our “amen” we assent to and say “yes” two things:
 - What we are about to receive – the Body / Blood of Christ
 - What we are to be come – the Body of Christ.
 - To say anything *other* than “amen” deprives the liturgy of this two-fold meaning and understanding.
 - During Communion – one song – emphasizing unity of congregation.
 - Gesture of reverence – unity of posture = unity of persons – we are to “shun any appearance of individualism or division (#95). US Bishops – sign of reverence (after MUCH debate) bow of the head. Not genuflection, not prostration... Bow of the head – we do this pretty well.
 - Host received in the hand or on the tongue – by personal preference. If in hand – careful... Sign of gesture before precious blood as well.
 - If on the tongue, please stick it out...
- When communion is finished, the priest (or deacon) purifies the vessels. Here again was a change from the 2000 Missal.
 - Previously, the EMHC’s had helped us to purify vessels – this was a special permission which the Vatican granted to the US for a specific period of time – and when that permission – that

indult – expired, Rome refused to renew it, so it was now the priest or deacon – and ONLY the priest or deacon, who could purify the sacred vessels following Communion.

- This is always somewhat awkward. If there are many vessels, it can take some time. We use only a few vessels – 2 chalices and 2 patens, so it is much easier to quickly purify right here at the altar – rather than just putting them in the sacristy to sit there – with Precious Blood in them – until father is able to get back to the sacristy.
- So, you’ll see what I’m beginning to purify all the vessels immediately after communion, rather than after Mass. It only takes a matter of a minute. And you need not just stare at me – which is what I *feel* – but spend some time in silent prayer with the God whom you just received into your body.
- The Church prescribes here a period of silent prayer – so maybe this purification gives us the opportunity for just that.
- Bringing an end to the Communion Rite is the **Post Communion prayer**. So, communion not over until now – this is why announcements, etc. belong here – not before it. We first conclude communion before going on to other things.

The Concluding Rites

- Brief announcements if necessary
- Here you are going to begin seeing the dismissal of EMHC’s to the sick. Did you know that EMHCs go, every single Sunday, to many of our homebound parishioners? It is a great blessing in our parish that we do this – that those who, because of age or illness, are not able to come to Mass are still connected with us – are still in “communion” with us – by receiving Holy Communion directly from Mass.
- You are going to see me calling EMHCs forward and giving them the Eucharist – so that they can then go to the sick and homebound. It is a great way for us to remember our sick brothers and sisters.
- The Mass ends with the final blessing (which is sometimes enriched by a solemn blessing and prayer over the people).
- And then the dismissal of the people – ite, missa est.
 - Here’s another translation change – The Mass is ended, go in peace. What a *terrible* translation of ite, missa est.
 - Ite – command form of “go.” So, this here is a command – GO
 - Missa est – you are sent.
 - This dismissal is really a reminder that, having been nourished by God’s Word and by the Holy Eucharist – we are now **sent out** to bring Christ into the world
- Kissing of altar, & recessional – traveling music.

One other thought on Communion: receiving communion means, “I am one with you – I believe what you believe.” Non-Catholics do not receive communion in our Church because we are NOT one – there are sad divisions between us. Nor do we receive communion in *their* churches – because we are not one with them in their beliefs. So, no matter how much they invite you – Catholics should not receive communion in non-Catholic churches just as non-Catholics should not receive holy Communion in our Church. Communion = unity – a unity for which Christ prayed, but which is not yet a reality.

Whew, we made it through the Mass! Many of us may not have realized so much symbolism and Scripture and meaning. And perhaps that is what we can take from this 4-week explanation of the Mass – realizing the work we are called to do – to offer ourselves to God, in union with Christ. To realize how our Communion with one another – how our unity as a people of God – is found in our reception of Christ’s Body and Blood in Holy Communion. So, during the Mass we have been feed and nourished in Word and in Sacrament. May all that we do – may all our effort to give ourselves over to God in union with Christ – as we prayed in the Our Father – help us to do as we heard in today’s 1st reading: to help us to say (and LIVE), “as for me and my house – we will serve the Lord – for He is our God.”