

August 13, 2017
By: Fr. David Jaspers

Introduction to the Mass:

What a joy it is to gather today to worship the Lord, to offer the sacrifice of the Cross to our Loving Father as the mystical body of Christ—the body gathered (signal to the people) and the priest acting in persona Christi caput—in the person of Christ the head.

For the next four weeks, in response to the requests by parishioners and vocalized by the pastoral council as well, the homilies at Mass are going to be a reflection on and explanation of the parts of the Mass. Today we will talk about the Introductory Rites. Next week the Liturgy of the Word; Then the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and then the final week the Communion Rites and Dismissal. You might even want to bring a pen and paper to take some notes about what strikes you.

As we do this, I invite you to pay a little more attention to the details of what we are doing. For example, today we have already entered the church, sang the opening song, carried in the Book of the Gospels, incensed the altar and cross, made the sign of the cross, and greeted one another-acknowledging the presence of the Lord. That's a lot! Fr. Hans and I are excited to explore the Liturgy with you during these next four weeks. (pause)
Now, brothers and sisters, let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries... (silence)
I confess...

Homily: Introductory Rites:

Mass, also known as the Sacred Mysteries or Divine Liturgy, is the source and summit of our faith. It is the place where we gather as the body of Christ, encounter Christ, are taught and fed by Christ, discover our true identity as beloved children of God in Christ, and worship our heavenly Father through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ. It's the place where the original communion with God from the Garden of Eden is restored, or as the Book of Revelations calls it: the wedding feast of the Lamb, which was foreshadowed at the wedding at Cana.

Today we are going to talk about the Introductory Rites. In brief, they are the way for us to prepare our hearts and minds for what is about to happen throughout the rest of the Mass. They include the entrance, greeting, penitential rite, kyrie (which is the *Lord, have Mercy*), Gloria, and Opening Collect prayer. We could have a homily on each of these, but then we'd be preaching on the Mass for an entire year. I going to try to put some book recommendations in the bulletin.

The Mass arguably begins when we enter the church. When we cross the threshold of the sanctuary, we bring our entire world with us. All our work, our play, the people we love, the people who have sinned against us, our joys and preoccupations. We bring all of this to our worship. We are a royal priesthood offering the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world: all of it.

As we pass the doors we sign ourselves with the cross of Christ and the waters of our baptism. We go to our pew and genuflect to Jesus in the tabernacle, then we take some time for sacred silence to prepare ourselves to celebrate Mass in “a devout and fitting manner,” as the General Instructions for Mass says it. (We’re blessed to have a big lobby and covered-patio to greet and socialize before and after Mass. Of course, there will be greetings here in the church, particularly the welcoming of visitors, but we don’t gab about our shopping lists or where we went for bingo last week because we’ve entered sacred space. Not just the sacred space or this building but the sacred space of our interior castle.

Here at Ascension we take a minute to introduce ourselves before Mass, because how can we be a community if we don’t know one another. This is an accommodation because sadly, most of us don’t come early enough to socialize or stay after to spend time with each another. In case you missed it, this greeting isn’t a pre-mass sign of peace. I always laugh when the community leader says, now let us turn to our neighbor and introduce ourselves and then parents and kids shake each others’ hands as if they don’t know one another. Don’t shake your kids’ hands; move down the pew to introduce yourself to the people around you. (smile)

Then the entrance chant or song begins. We are all united as we lift our voices to the Lord. Psalm 91 says, “Come, let’s sing to the Lord and shout with joy to the rock who saves us.” We are singing to the Lord and are to do so with our whole heart heart. When I was a kid we listened to the Kid’s Praise Albums with Psalty the Singing Songbook. Psalty teaches the kids, “God doesn’t want us to sing to him just with our lips, but from our hearts.” Later he explains, “when we just go through the motions when we sing, That makes me sad.”

In addition to singing to the Lord, the entrance song introduces our thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompanies the procession of the priest and ministers. The diversity of ministers points to the diversity of the body of Christ and the diversity of ministries within the body. In the letter to the Corinthians, God teaches us through St. Paul that each of us have roles within the body of Christ. A Mass with just the priest, such as most daily Masses, is not the fullness of the liturgy, just the bare bones. Psalm 68 talks about the procession of ancient Israel with the different tribes with the singers going first. Our procession as Christians is led by the Cross. “Unless you take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says.

At the seminary a movie screen writer came to tell his story. He wrote a box office hit in the 90s. He was a lapsed Catholic at the time, having left his faith after experiencing many heavy crosses in his early life. Later in life he got throat cancer and in desperation began to pray again. That first prayer in over 40 years led him back to faith and the Church. He had come to embraced the cross of Christ and is so proud to be the Cross bearer for Mass at his local parish that he named his autobiography *The Cross Bearer*.

We bear the cross of Christ and begin Mass with the sign of the same Cross; we invoke the name of the Holy Trinity, naming the God whom we worship. Our worship is not to some generic sense of God, but to the Trinitarian God who has revealed himself and continues to do so through his Word and in so many private ways. The first word of the Mass is “In.” It’s also the first word of the Bible, and the first word of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning...” We are praying to the God of all creation, the God who through the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Blessed Virgin Mary and became one of us for our salvation.

Then the Priest says, “The Lord be with you.” or one of the other greetings that are found in the letters of St. Paul in the Bible. And you respond, (invite) “And with your Spirit.” Just so you know, this was a unique response in the ancient world as well, but it invites us to recognize that God is present with us. This is not just a mundane greeting between business associates, but the recognition that we are the people of God and his Spirit is here. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I with you.”

Recognizing God’s presence we also recognize our sin and need for a savior. One friend of mine shared that she loves the Confiteor (the I confess). For her, she says, “I just get to acknowledge, ‘Jesus, it’s because of my sin that you have given yourself on the cross.’” We are the poor tax-collector whose prayer was heard. With him we strike our breast and say, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.” Beautifully, in a moment of ritualized vulnerability, we turn to one another and say, “Pray for me brothers and sisters to the Lord our God.” And then we do, crying out, “Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy.”

The prayer of absolution the priest prays for all of us is the same prayer the altar server also used pre-Vatican II to pray for the priest, when the priest and the people prayed the Confiteor separately. It is a prayer that you can pray with your children after your nightly examination of conscience. It is the reminder that what we are doing: the making present of the passion of Christ whose blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

In the Eucharist our venial sins are forgiven. With regard to mortal sin, after having confessed them and received absolution by “God the Father of Mercies who through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins”—in other words: what we celebrate in the Eucharist—we come to Mass to make manifest publicly what we have received in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: namely, Communion with God and the Church. (Just as an aside: that is why our faith teaches us it is a sin to receive communion while in a state of mortal sin, because it is a lie. I’ll never forget the Episcopalian woman who told me, “Father my husband is having an affair and is still serving as a Eucharistic minister at our church.” It seemed his lie before God and the church community hurt her more than his infidelity.) This balance of grace and humility—this balance between forgiveness for sins and the humility to say “I need to go to confession” is challenging at times but also incredibly beautiful and corresponds with our human longing for justice and mercy. And our God is infinite Mercy. And so we pray, Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

Our God is good. All the time. “The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord.” Blessed be the Lord! Glory to God in the highest! Lord you alone are the most high! Having encountered God’s mercy and love we can’t but help to sing his praises! Fr. Hans and Seminarian Tony the other night were explaining to me why the Gloria is the greatest praise song of all time! I know we don’t normally do it, but just close your eyes for a moment and open your hands or even raise them and repeat after me: Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father...

We have left all behind and stand before God ready to pray with our whole heart and mind and strength and being and the priest says it: Let us pray. And in the silence of our hearts we do! We pray to our God in adoration and supplication bringing our intentions before him. Then, the presiding priest prays, gathering our prayers together in the prayer called the Collect because it collects our prayers together. It is not just his prayer but the prayer of the

universal Roman church and is being prayed throughout the entire world that Sunday. As we pray with him our hearts are oriented towards the theme of the rest of the Mass. In it we thank God for who he is and ask his blessing through Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with him in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

And all the people say, Amen.