

Introduction

What is Liturgy? As always, let's begin with a good definition. Liturgy comes from the Greek and it meant something, some work, that a wealthy patron did for the people, for example constructing a public building. So, what it means for us today is what our patron, God, does for us. Liturgy is primarily the work that God does for us. At the same time, we participate in that work. A useful way to think about it is that whenever we participate in some liturgy, God is glorified, and we are sanctified. God is praised, blessed adored and glorified and we are made holy.

Another helpful realization is that when we speak of Liturgy, we're not talking only about the Mass. Liturgy also includes the Liturgy of the Hours, in which the church prays the psalms in much the same way as Jesus would have prayed the psalms and the Jews before him would have prayed the psalms. That praying of the psalms has continued in the Christian tradition for the past 200 years, mostly by monks and nuns and religious brothers and sisters, but also by all priests and deacons. In reality though, it is good for all the church to pray the psalms, as Sacrosanctum Concilium 100 says: "Pastors of souls should see to it that the chief hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts. And the laity, too, are encouraged to recite the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually."

Another part of the Liturgy of the Church is the Sacramental life. All seven Sacraments make up part of the Liturgy by which God is glorified and we are sanctified.

But the Mass is the high point. It is, as the Second Vatican Council rightly said, the Source and Summit of our entire life. The greatest prayer ever was when Jesus offered himself completely to God on the cross. We participate in that sacrifice at the Mass. The offering of sacrifice to God is the greatest act of worship, and therefore the Mass is when we give the most glory to God, and in turn receive the most grace through receiving the Eucharist. God asks us to pray perfectly, and he gives us the Mass which is the perfect prayer, because it is the same prayer which Jesus offered to the Father.

Part I: The Introductory Rites

Today we begin with the Introductory Rites. As a whole, the introductory Rites are a way for us to prepare our hearts and minds for what is about to happen throughout the rest of the mass. They are a kind of transition period for us to realize we're moving out of the world around us, and into a connection to heaven which transcends time and space. They are a beginning, and introduction and a preparation.

Their purpose is to ensure that we establish communion among ourselves and dispose ourselves to listen to the word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist.

To begin with, we make the Sign of the Cross. This sign is a reminder of our baptism, how we entered the Church and received the faith through water and the Holy Spirit. This short prayer, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” is a declaration that yes, I am part of the Church, I am part of the Body of Christ, and I have a right and a responsibility to take part in this highest of prayers. It is simple, but its meaning goes far deeper than we realize. Our baptism makes us able to participate in Eucharist, so we begin our Eucharistic Celebration by recalling that baptism.

Then comes the greeting “The Lord be with you” or “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” to which we respond “and with your spirit.” This is no simple hello. This is the priest signifying that the Lord is present with the people, within the Body of Christ, and the people responding that the Priest, *in persona Christi Capitis*, is united to Christ the head to offer the sacrifice with and for the people. We pray *in* Christ and *as* Christ. The greeting and response reminds us of who we have become through the Sacraments of Baptism and Orders.

Then comes the Penitential Act, for which there are three forms. We either say the prayer “I confess...” or the priest (or deacon) says something like “you were sent to heal the contrite of heart, Lord have mercy” etc. All three options include us saying “we have sinned” and repenting for our sin. Immediately after recalling our baptism, we recall that we are sinners who still need mercy even to be present here at mass. And we ask those around us, both the saints in heaven and our brothers and sisters on earth to pray for us.

And immediately we pray for each other and for ourselves with the “Kyrie Eleison,” the “Lord have mercy.” With this prayer we ask God to forgive us and to forgive our neighbors. It is important to note that the priest’s prayer “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life” does not have the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance. In the mass, our venial sins, that is our lesser sins are forgiven. But only the Sacrament of Reconciliation is effective for forgiving mortal, serious sin.

Then comes the Gloria, the Glory to God in the Highest. This is not just a song. It is truly a prayer. It is also ancient. We should be mindful that we pray it well, giving glory to God with our whole being, exalting his various names and worshipping Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Saint Augustine said that when we sing we pray twice, and so singing the Gloria is doubling our praise of God’s great glory!

The final part of the Introductory rite is usually called the Opening Prayer, but it is more properly called the Collect. This prayer sets the theme of the Mass, on Saints' days or feast days or other special days we will focus a little more on that aspect of the Paschal Mystery. The word "Collect" is spelled exactly the same as the word "collect," and it serves for us to collect all of our individual prayers and intentions, and all of the introductory rites, and to place it all before God as we begin our Liturgy. After saying "Let us Pray" there is usually a moment of silence to gather our intentions together, and then the priest will say or sing the Collect, uniting us as we begin the Mass. We bring our entire lives at this point and offer them to God on the altar. Everything, our personal intentions, what people have asked us to pray for, things for which we are thankful, our sinfulness, is all united into the worshipping Body of Christ by the Introductory Rites and placed on the Altar of Sacrifice to be given to God in Christ.

Recalling our baptism, recognizing God's presence among us, recalling our sinfulness and asking for mercy, and gathering our intentions for this Mass. This is how we focus ourselves and how God focuses us to recognize who we were, who we are, and what our needs are that we bring to this Mass, so that we may pray well. This is how we prepare ourselves to Glorify God and to be sanctified by God.