

## Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

### Part 4: Introductory Rites (2 of 2)

We now come to the sign of the cross. As we mentioned last week, the start of mass is actually the entrance procession with its proper entrance chant. Much could be said about the sign of the cross—it is the greatest paradox of our faith: an instrument of torture and yet our greatest sign of hope. In the cross are contained the riches of eternal life, our joy, and our victory in Christ. Through the cross the devil and sin are vanquished, heaven is opened, and the Church is born from Christ's pierced side. "St. John of Damascus wrote, 'This was given to us as a sign on our forehead, just as the circumcision was given to Israel: for by it we believers are separated and distinguished from unbelievers.'"<sup>1</sup> At our baptism, we are claimed for Christ and marked with the cross; at our confirmation, our foreheads are sealed with the cross, and throughout our lives we must call the saving power of the cross to mind when we are in need. Making the sign of the cross reverently is a great act of devotion and the church actually gives a *partial indulgence* when it is said reverently! We should pay attention when moving our hand so that we actually make a cross, rather than merely look like 'swatting flies'. We should touch our forehead, the center of our ribcage, the left shoulder, and then the right shoulder.

The formula to be said while making the sign of the cross is: "In the **name** of the Father, **and** of the Son, **and** of the Holy Spirit, Amen". Each word is important. Notice that 'name' is singular while each person is invoked separately—this is the mystery of the Trinity, One God in three divine persons. For a while, it was in vogue to address God as "creator, redeemer, and sanctifier" to eliminate gender/language issues, but this was actually heresy! One's *function* is not the same as a revealed name. Besides, we can't isolate any of those *functions* exclusively to a particular person of the Trinity because God is one! It is so important that we use the traditional formula that if someone were baptized in the name of the 'creator, redeemer, and sanctifier,' the baptism would be *invalid*! The simple truth is that our faith is *revealed* to us, and since God is revealed to us through Jesus as *Father*, that's how we address God—realizing that God transcends gender limitations. By making the sign of the cross in the Mass, we call to mind our baptism and Christ's saving work in our lives, as well as dedicating our actions to the glory of the Trinity—not a bad intention!

Next we call to mind our sins, asking for God's forgiveness so that we might be cleansed and made worthy to receive the holy Body and Blood of Christ. The "Kyrie Eleison" (Lord Have Mercy) hearkens back to the blind men in Matthew's Gospel who cry out "Have mercy on us, Son of David"<sup>2</sup> If we make their cry our own, the Lord will heal us of our spiritual blindness in the Sacrament. It is important to remember that, if we are truly sorry, *venial* sins are forgiven in the reception of Holy Communion! If we have committed *mortal* sin, we still need to go to confession before receiving our Lord in the Eucharist.

The Gloria reminds us of the Angels who announced peace to the Shepherds at Christmas. Indeed, every Mass is Christmas: Christ comes in flesh on the altar! There is no more appropriate response than to praise God along with the Angels! Praising trains our hearts to respond more quickly to God's love for us.

Finally, we have the Opening Prayer: the first of three prayers that the priest prays by himself on behalf of all the people. The other two prayers are the prayer over the gifts (*super oblata*) and the prayer after communion (*postcommunio*). These 'priestly prayers' are called *Collects*, which gather the prayers of the faithful and then offer one united prayer to the Father. These prayers are thematically related with the readings or the saint of the day, revealing a principle aspect of their life or teaching. When the priest prays these prayers, he invites everyone to unite their hearts to his with the words, "Let us pray"—at this moment he is acting in the person of Christ the head, speaking on behalf of the whole Church! After having cleansed our hearts and praised God for his goodness, we are now open to hearing God's word, which we will look at next time when we start examining the Liturgy of the Word!

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<sup>1</sup> [www.fisheaters.com/sign.html](http://www.fisheaters.com/sign.html)

<sup>2</sup> Pitre, Brant, "A Biblical Explanation of the Mass" [www.Brantpitre.com](http://www.Brantpitre.com)