

Brief Homily Reflections on the Mass:

1. What is the Mass?

Beginning this week, Fr. Ramos and I will be cutting down our homilies a little bit to include a short reflection on a part of the Mass. There are also books available at the back of the church about the Mass you can take, and tomorrow evening we have the first of two special presentations we will have before the summer that go into more depth. Also check out the videos on the Mass on the website.

Today we reflect on what the Mass is. The Mass is not just a ritual, or a meeting of a club, it is a continuation of the Old Testament worship set up by God - which was made new by Jesus Christ. In the Mass we come together as Christians have since the first century, we unite as a community, we allow God to feed us, we engage in our priestly ministry as part of Jesus' body, we worship the God who is deserving of praise, and we allow God to feed us both in the Word and in the Eucharist. It is the main way we "keep Holy the Sabbath" as the Lord commanded, it is how we unite more closely to our God in a powerful way, and it is how we praise God for God's great love. Like commitment to work and family, it is a duty. Through our joining Jesus' sacrifice we offer ourselves and our lives - an offering that becomes blessings for the world that we pray for - and we enter into an encounter with Jesus that is only possible during Mass.

We will be looking over the next few months in these reflections at various parts of the Mass. If the Mass could hold more meaning for you, then please listen, please focus, please see what a great thing can be gained from one hour per week of giving God only a small bit back for all God has given to us. This is the source of our Christian life and the high point as well.

2. What does it mean to participate in Mass?

What does it mean to participate in the Mass? Many years ago people went to "hear" Mass, that is they came to Mass to be spectators of the sacrifice going on, but did not really verbally engage except maybe to sing. After Vatican II there was an emphasis on the people having parts by which to respond and verbally participate in the Mass. However, what some of the people of older times did not realize, and many people in our own time do not realize, is that speaking is not the only way that we participate in Mass.

We don't come to Mass to be entertained (so that shouldn't be an expectation), however, participating well makes the Mass more meaningful to you, gives greater praise to God, and allows God to touch you. Here are some ways to participate: (1) Pray, don't just say responses: Listen to what you are saying, speak from the heart, (2) Sing: Singing brings us bodily into participation in a special way. Humans use music so much because it touches something deep inside us. If you can't sing well, then just sing softly - but sing. (3) Listen attentively to the readings and homily, see what God is trying to say to you - even if it is a reading you've heard many times, search for the way it may speak to you today, (4) Focus on the words of the songs, the prayers the priest says on behalf of all, the Eucharistic prayer. Mentally pray along with them, and (5) Think about what you are going to offer at the Mass - we will speak more on this in another talk. The Mass is a wonderful act of worship, a place to offer to God the week that has passed, and a place that we can meet God and be strengthened for the coming week. Participating both physically, verbally, and mentally brings it more alive.

3. Presidential Prayers and praying these, Priest's stances

Last week we mentioned participation at the Mass. One of the ways to do this is to focus on the words of the prayers of the Mass that are being said by the ordained priest. When the priest is speaking to God aloud with hands extended, he is praying on behalf of the whole community present - we all should be focusing on these words, making them our own, praying along in our hearts. We all share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, and although the ordained priest is praying aloud in the name of the community and of the Church, we all are joined to that action. When the priest says "let us pray" it means ... "let us pray" - US not ME.

The ordained priest sometimes prays as representative of the people present (as in the opening prayer, the prayer over the gifts, and the prayer after communion), sometimes in the name of the whole church (as in parts of the Eucharistic Prayer), sometimes privately to God (these are generally silent prayers the priest says or personal references in the homily), and also the priest lends his voice to Jesus as Jesus - through him - speaks the words of consecration. Pay attention to when he is saying "us" and "we," when he is saying "me" or "I" (again generally silent prayers), and when he is saying "your Church."

Jesus is our one priest who becomes present in all the believers who form his Body worshipping the Father. See if you can note the various times the ordained priest is acting as a person worshipping God with his brothers and sisters, when he acting as a representative of the community offering prayers, and when Jesus uses the priest's voice or appearance to become more fully and powerfully present to us.

4. Introductory Rites

After the entrance procession comes to the sanctuary all the ministers reverence the altar. The altar is a symbol of Christ's presence (scripture says Jesus is the priest, victim, and altar of sacrifice), priests and deacons reverence the altar with a kiss. We sing a song to help us join together as one body with Jesus as our head. Then we make the sign of the cross which reminds us of our baptism, reminds us of the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit and that we do this in the name of that God. The priest then greets everyone "The Lord be with you" - the response is unique and was mistranslated in the past: "and with your spirit." The people are affirming the spirit of Jesus placed in the priest at his ordination. Several other times this greeting is used, always when the people are asking Jesus to be present in the person of the priest - you are actually talking to Jesus, not the priest. It helps to remind the priest that he is only a person, that all that Jesus will do through him is because of Jesus' spirit.

We then ask God's forgiveness for minor faults and sins as we move forward to encounter the divine presence in the Eucharist. We reflect, we pray privately asking forgiveness, and all pray "Lord have Mercy" together. After this cleansing we are now able to say or sing aloud the great hymn of praise to God that is referenced in the Gospel of Luke "Glory to God." After asking God to prepare us, and giving God praise we now pause for private prayer. When the priest said "let us pray" it is an invitation for each person to pray privately to God as they enter the Mass, to speak to God what each one seeks in the Mass, to ask God to open us to receive in Word and in Eucharist the divine presence. All then mentally join the priest as he prays the opening prayer which is meant to collect all the prayers of the body and with one voice we send them to God. We now sit to hear the God whom we have opened ourselves to speak to us.

5. Liturgy of the Word

After we complete the introductory rites we sit to listen to the Lord through his word and be fed. It is easy for all of us to let our minds drift during the readings and homily, but this is a privileged time to hear God speak to us directly. God uses scripture to communicate to us where we are at the present time. You can hear a passage of scripture 500 times and then gain a message the 501st time that never occurred to you before. God speaks to us uniquely in our hearts in a place beyond the words. That is the space where we encounter THE Word - Jesus Christ.

The homily is also a time to see what God is saying to you individually. I have had the experience a number of times where someone will come up to me and say "Father, it really hit me when you said *X* in the homily, that is what I really needed to hear right now." In many of those times what they hear was not what I said - but God used the words, the images and the concepts in the homily to speak another word that the person needed to hear - a communication directly from God to the heart. The combination of the coordinated readings, and the homily reflecting on these readings creates a unique environment for the word of God to speak to us.

6. Creed and Prayers of the Faithful

After we have heard the Word of God proclaimed, and have been able to reflect on it with the aid of the homily and the benefit of a minute of silence, we all stand. This time after hearing the Lord speak to us lets us join together as a single body after we have been individually encountering the Lord. We rise to affirm our common faith by professing that faith out loud with our brothers and sisters, and we turn to the Father with petitions for ourselves and the whole world. This is a time where we join to all those Christians in the world who hold to the catholic (that is little "c" which means universal, authentic, Christian faith expressed in the creed), and we join to all those in the world in need as we (as the Body of Jesus) offer prayers to the Father in Jesus' name. In faith we turn to the God we have praised and listened to, and we look to God's great promise of love and fidelity, expressed through the whole of scripture, and ask for the world to be blessed and helped by God's power and mercy.

7. The Offertory

After we have professed the faith together and offered prayers to God as the Body of Christ we leave the Liturgy of the Word and move to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After having petitioned God asking for our needs and those of the world we now make offering to God. In this time we offer a portion of our material goods in the form of money to both support the ongoing activity of the church and to increase our faith in God by parting with some of that which we find so valuable. This has been done since the earliest days of the church - check out the Acts of the Apostles. The other ancient offering is to offer the bread and wine to be transformed into Jesus' Body and Blood so we can participate in Jesus' sacrifice. We also can add into the offering our own sacrifice as we place into the bread and wine our own struggles, joys, sufferings, trials, and successes. This portion that we add is symbolized by the small bit of water added to the chalice, as our gifts as part of the Body of Christ, blend into Christ's own sacrifice and become part of that great sacrifice - a chance for our struggles to become part of a greater sacrifice of the Body that brings greater blessings to the world. As the gifts are collected and prepared we can think of how much we have from God and how much we can offer back.

8. The Preface

After our gifts have been prepared, after all the people have asked for the sacrifice at the priest's hands - to be accepted by the Lord, we enter the Eucharistic Prayer. This great prayer of thanksgiving begins with a dialogue between the priest and the people where we lift up our hearts and prepare to give the thanks to God that it is only right and just that we offer. The prayer that follows changes at different times and seasons and contains wonderful descriptions of parts of our faith. Listen to it, soak in the wisdom of the words, they help to focus on the great mystery we are to celebrate in the Eucharist, and also the mysteries that we remember at various points in the church year. At the end of this prayer, as we are entering into the special presence of God in Jesus Christ that will transform our offerings into Jesus' Body and Blood, we join the angels in their prayer to God. This is direct quotation of the prayer of the angels found in Isaiah and Revelation and also contains a line from Matthew's Gospel spoken by the people welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem. It is a fitting prayer as we move to enter into the presence of God where the angels always are, and welcome Jesus into our presence. Let us pray it with devotion before we kneel to wait God's special entry into our assembly.

9. The Epiclesis and Consecration (up to Mystery of Faith)

The Eucharistic prayer which began with the preface, moves onto two big parts. First is the time where the bread and wine is transformed by Jesus' words into his body and blood. We believe that Jesus comes to us and transforms the bread and wine in the same way as he did at the Last Supper. Although they continue to have the appearances of bread and wine - the taste, the smell, the feel - at a deeper level they have changed what they are, as was the case at the Last Supper. Before these words you will see the priest extend his hands over the offering and ask that the Holy Spirit make the offering Holy so that it may be transformed. Then the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper are reenacted in such a way that Jesus is speaking through the priest. After the bread and wine has become the body and blood of Jesus the priest then proclaims what we have before us: "the Mystery of Faith." We respond to this as we reflect on the great mystery of how Jesus can perform this miracle and he leaves it to us to accept the mystery in faith.

10. Noticing the Parts of the Eucharistic Prayer: Living, dead, offering, unity of church and all people.

The second part of the Eucharistic prayer begins after the gifts have been transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Notice that the priest switches back to the third person as he prays in the name of the community. Join in this prayer which the whole body of Christ, with Jesus now present as head of that body can offer the perfect praise to the Father. We are now fully the Body of Christ and participate in Jesus' offering of himself to the Father for the salvation of the world. The offerings that we have placed in the gifts are taken up to heaven with Jesus' sacrifice and become part of it. Listen as the words "we offer you" are said, hear the prayers for the living, the dead, the unity of the Church and the world, and that as we participate in the offering of the sacrifice we may participate in its effects of salvation. This great prayer ends with the doxology "Through Him, With Him, and In Him" a final word of praise to the Father before we all respond AMEN!

11. Our Father/Lamb of God/Behold the Lamb

After we complete the Eucharistic Prayer and during this Jesus has become present on the altar, and we have participated in the eternal sacrifice of Jesus - we return to our own time. We leave the eternal moment of God's existence that we have touched upon and we now step back from that mysterious moment and rise to our feet. Grateful for what God has just done for us, grateful for the privilege God has shown us in allowing us to participate in that great sacrifice of Jesus Christ we turn to the Father. Mindful of our connection to God in Jesus' body, remembering our baptism by which we are made children of God, we now offer the prayer that Jesus gave us when he was asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray. In the "Our Father" we acknowledge and praise God who is in heaven, we pray for God's kingdom of peace to come to the world, we then ask for our daily bread as we are gathered around the bread which is now the Body of Jesus. We then acknowledge that on the altar is the Lamb of God, who has been sacrificed for us, and as the body of the lamb is broken and prepared for us to receive we ask for God's mercy. Finally we look at the Lamb of God, acknowledge that we are unworthy to receive, and ask that we be healed.

12. Communion and Dismissal

After we have acknowledged the Body and Blood of Jesus present as the Lamb of God we prepare to make communion. At the exodus from Egypt, the families gathered and ate together a lamb. It was a symbol of unity and of the promise of God to save them - it was the first passover supper. Later, in the old temple worship, after the sacrifice on the altar was complete, the flesh of the sacrificed lamb was eaten by the priests and the people. This was a way to participate in the sacrifice that took away sins - it was a physical food to give strength to the body. Jesus instituted this worship of our Mass at the Last Supper - where the food is food for the soul. The Last supper was a passover meal, so it is linked to that Exodus from slavery and the freedom of following God. It is the way we participate in the one definitive sacrifice that Jesus offers in the ultimate temple in heaven. As we share the Eucharist we give thanks, we are bound together in one body, we celebrate the wonders of God saving us, and we participate in Jesus' sacrifice. As we approach we focus on the reality of this great gift. We receive our Lord reverently on the tongue or by making a sign with our hands to receive the king. This is a special time for prayer a time of special closeness as we have touched and received the physical presence of the unseen God. This climax is followed by final prayers, a blessing, and a dismissal. The priest leaves symbolizing Jesus walking forward, and we all follow - going forth to share what we have received in this Mass with others.