The Meaning of the Mass: Part One
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

The importance of the Mass in our lives cannot be overstated, and yet how much do we really know about it? For many of us, the Mass is something we have attended throughout our lives, but we might ask ourselves what it is that we actually do here. Yes, we listen to the scriptures proclaimed and we receive the Eucharist. But, do we fully appreciate all that is really happening?

The first place to start is not with the Mass itself, but what happens before we even show up. We need to ask ourselves a simple question—why am I even here? Or, to put it another way—why do I need to go to Mass? What is compelling me to attend? Most people would answer according to different lines of thinking. Some would speak about what the Mass does for them. Others may say that they have simply gone since they were children, as their parents taught them to. Then, there are those who recognize that not attending Mass should be understood as a mortal sin based on the command of Christ—“Do this in memory of me.” And yet for others, it could be that they are searching for meaning in their life. It would be easy to come up with so many other reasons why people attend Mass. Suffice it to say, there are many different motivations that draw people into the celebration of Mass.

Why a person should want to attend Mass comes down to something very simple: God invites you! And God would only call you to do something that is truly for your good. The invitation to Mass is part of God’s overall desire to be in a relationship with you. God’s desire for us began when He called us into creation by speaking our name. Ever since that moment He has wanted a deeper relationship with us, and He understands that one of the places to build a relationship is at a meal.

When I was a child, we were always at dinner at 6 PM—no matter what! As we ate our meal it was not simply about the food we shared, but it was equally about sharing the events of our day. It was an important facet of how we grew as a family: we prayed together, we broke bread, and we shared what was important in our lives.

When we look to his ministry, we can easily discern that Jesus liked to eat. There are many instances of Christ coming to table with his disciples and those who wanted to know Him better. Meals at the time of Christ were very important events. They were not about going through a drive-through and scoffing down some food.

When people sat down for a meal, it was intended to take time. You gathered around the table to grow in true intimacy, by sharing yourself with those with whom you ate. It was about breaking open the story of your life. It was about becoming companions on the journey of life. Therefore, those with whom you shared a meal spoke a great deal about who you were. It is one of the reasons that the Pharisees and others complained so much—that Christ ate with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. Jesus ate with outcasts, the dregs of society. It raised questions about who Jesus thought He was. But Jesus made it clear that He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. As we gather around the table of the Lord, we should think about those with whom Jesus ate and be reminded that we are not a Church of saints, but rather, sinners striving to become saints through the grace of God. It is a time for us to bond and become a family in Christ.

And so, this is why we gather. We are called by God to pray together, break bread, and come to know each other by sharing ourselves in this moment.