

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 6 – The Structure of the Liturgy

In the sacraments, the Holy Spirit “acts in the same way as at other times in the economy of salvation: he prepares the Church to encounter her Lord; he recalls and makes Christ manifest to the faith of the assembly. By his transforming power, he makes the mystery of Christ present here and now. Finally the Spirit of communion unites the Church to the life and mission of Christ.” (CCC, 1092) We can see this work of the Holy Spirit in the structure of the Mass.

The Mass has two main parts, what we call the Liturgy of the Word, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In some times in the past they have been called the Mass of the Catechumens and the Mass of the Faithful, because the catechumens were able to be present for the first part, but not for the second. Only the baptized were permitted to attend the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Before the Liturgy of the Word, we have the Introductory Rites. Here we are prepared to encounter our Lord in the central two parts of the Mass, gathering as the Body of Christ, seeking mercy and forgiveness for our sins, praising the Lord, and asking for what we need.

While the Liturgy of the Word has always been important (all the Christian liturgies which go back to the early centuries contain it), in *practice* it has sometimes gotten short shrift. For example, under the 1917 Code of Canon Law, to fulfill your Sunday obligation you had to be present for the three elements of the sacrifice: the offertory, the consecration, and the communion. With the constant temptation to do the bare minimum, this led some to see the Liturgy of the Word as unimportant. This is what led the Second Vatican Council to make the claim: “The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.

Accordingly this sacred Synod strongly urges pastors of souls that, when instructing the faithful, they insistently teach them to take their part in the entire Mass...” (SC, 56). As the Council’s constitution on the Word of God put it: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body.” (*Dei Verbum*, 21). These are strong statements about how we as Catholics view the Bible!

In the Liturgy of the Word, we *recall*, or rather, God recalls to us, the wondrous deeds of the Lord throughout history, and we are taught by Christ and the apostles. This ‘remembering’ is a special kind that takes place in the liturgy (see CCC, 1103). And we should be moved to draw closer to Jesus, to give our entire selves to him.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, having been fed with God’s Word, we respond in faith, and are invited to share in his sacrifice, by offering ourselves in union with him to the Father, in the Holy Spirit. As the priestly people of God, under the leadership of Christ, we intercede for the whole Church, for the whole world. And since our sacrifice is accepted because it has been given in union with Christ’s, we are given the immeasurable gift of being brought into deeper union with Christ and the Church by receiving him in a sacramental way, becoming more truly members of his Body.

Following the Liturgy of the Eucharist we have the concluding rites. While short, they are important! Because we are not only united to the *life* of Christ in Holy Communion, but also to his *mission*, which is the salvation of the world, and the institution of the Kingdom of God. This is why the liturgy is described as the “source” and “summit” of the Christian life, but not the *only* thing that makes our life Christian. Our participation should result in living evidence of our transformation in Christ!

