

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 3, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings

Scripture and the Mystery of the Mass

There always seems to be a new study coming out talking about the fact that most Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. I am always confused as to why people are surprised by this. Sooner or later, I hope the Catholic Church will simply admit that we did a bad job of teaching the faith to the generations following Vatican II. To help Catholics understand the importance of the Eucharist I would like to reflect on a series of essays written by former Protestant Ministers who became Catholic on the Mass and the Eucharist. The book was titled: *Catholic for a Reason III: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mass*. The first article was written by Edward Sri and is called "A Biblical Walk Through the Mass." My commentary will be in the normal font and quotes from Sri will be in bold.

At almost every point of the Mass, God's Word is jumping out in signs, gestures, words, and songs.

The Catholic Mass and the Seven Sacraments were not something that a human being made up one day. They have been a part of God's plan of self-revelation from the beginning.

Furthermore, the ritual action itself of making the sign of the cross on our foreheads has roots in Sacred Scripture. In the Book of Ezekiel, for example, a cross-shaped symbol served as a sign of divine protection. God gave the prophet Ezekiel a vision about the judgment that would upon Jerusalem for its idolatry. In this vision, the faithful Jews who were marked with the Hebrew letter tau on their foreheads would be spared when the day of reckoning arrived (Ezek. 9:4). What is significant for our topic is that this Hebrew letter had the shape of a cross. Therefore, already in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel, being marked with a cross on the forehead symbolized covenant union with God and divine protection.

This helps shed light on the Catholic practice of making the sign of the cross. When we first became Christians, we, too, were marked with the sign of a cross at our baptisms when the priest traced the cross of Christ over our bodies. Therefore, whenever we repeat this basic gesture at Mass, we are retracing the same mark that was placed on us at the beginning of our life in Christ. In so doing, we remind ourselves that we have been set apart by Christ, and we renew our commitment to live in union with Him. As in the time of Ezekiel, the sign of the cross continues to serve as a powerful symbol expressing our covenant with God and His protection over our lives.

Marking ourselves with the Sign of the Cross and by praying the words, we are like a sports team chanting our names as we put on our uniforms. It does not matter where we have come from because today we are a part of God's team. The other people in the room are brothers and sisters in Christ. We all have the same family coat of arms (the Cross).

Many Catholics are so familiar with this line from the Mass that they may not appreciate the full force of what these words really mean. This is not just a pious greeting or a religious way of saying, "Welcome!" This is not simply a cue for the laity to respond, "And also with you." From a biblical perspective, these words represent a divine summons, an invitation to a daunting undertaking. If we were ancient Jews who understood what the words, "The Lord be with you," really meant, we probably would be trembling in fear and awe every time we heard these words spoken at Mass.

Throughout the Scriptures, when God calls someone to an important role in His plan of salvation, He gives assurances that He will be with that person. For example, when Moses was called to confront Pharaoh and lead the people of slavery in Egypt, he was afraid, felt unsure of his own ability, and tried to persuade God to choose someone else for the job. However, God insisted on Moses' mission and told him, "I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12). Similarly when God commissioned Joshua to lead the people into the Promise Land, He said to him, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you" (Josh. 1:5) When God called Gideon to defend the Israelites from the powerful foreign enemies, the angel told him, "The Lord is with you" (Judg. 6:12). When God called the young Virgin Mary to serve in the extraordinary role of being the mother of Israel's messiah, Gabriel said to her, "The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). When Jesus commissioned the apostles to evangelize the whole world, He said "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Please note that this book was written before the new translation of the Roman Missal that changed "and also with you" to "and with your spirit." What is God asking you to do? Do you trust that He will be there for you?



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November 10, 2019

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At the Kyrie in the Mass, we stand in this biblical tradition of calling on God's mercy for our own lives and the lives of others. In reciting the liturgical responses, "Lord have mercy... Christ have mercy... Lord have mercy," we become like David, repenting of our sins and asking for God's forgiveness. We become like the blind man begging for Christ to heal our own weaknesses and lack of spiritual vision. We become like the fathers in the Gospel, pleading for Jesus to act in the lives of those we love. In saying Kyrie Eleison ("Lord have mercy") at Mass, we humbly entrust our entire lives—all our weaknesses, sins, fears, and sufferings—and the lives of those we love, to the merciful heart of Christ.

The Penitential Rite (Kyrie) at Mass is a moment a raw honesty before God. We admit that we are sinners dependent upon God's mercy. There is no need to care about what others think or be afraid that God will walk away. God came to save sinners.

We do not come to God demanding things like the Pharisees and Scribes. We humbly come before the Lord our God. We come like the Prodigal Son before his forgiving father. We come before our forgiving Divine Father.

Therefore, whenever we sing the "Gloria" at Mass, we are not singing any ordinary hymn. We are singing a song inspired by the angels! Even more, we join the choirs of angels in heaven by singing the same praises that they sang to welcome the Christ child in Bethlehem. And this most appropriate, for in the Mass, the Christmas mystery is, in a sense, repeated. The same God, who came down to earth and was born a child two-thousand years ago, comes down to earth again on our altars at every Mass. Thus, it is fitting that we participate in the heavenly praise, which originally greeted the God-Man in Bethlehem, as we prepare at Mass to welcome the same Christ who humbly comes to us in Holy Communion.

God became one of us!!! He did not send His angels into the world to destroy us but rather to offer us peace. God's glory comes through forgiveness and mercy and not through annihilating His enemies or sinners. We should follow God's example.

In Jesus' day the Jewish synagogue worship involved readings from different parts of their Scriptures based on a three-year cycle. Similarly, each Sunday in the Liturgy of the Word, Catholics hear readings from a broad range of Scripture, covering four major areas of the Bible: The Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament Letters (or Acts or Revelation) and the Gospels. Like the synagogue liturgy, the biblical readings for Sunday Mass are structured on a three-year cycle that presents an amazing breadth of Scripture. In fact, Catholics attending Mass every Sunday end up hearing almost all of the Bible every three years.

I like the fact that God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has guided the Church to have a three year reading cycle that all Catholic adhere to. The readings you hear at Mass at one parish are the same as the readings taking place half-way around the world. The readings are not left to the whim of the priest or other Church leader.

Personally I find it amazing how the "right" reading seems to come at the exact time I need to hear it and pray with it.

Just to clarify, the Sunday Readings are set to a three year cycle. The weekday readings are set to a two year cycle.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
November 17, 2019
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"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5). These words represent the Israelite creed of the Old Testament known as the shema, which was named after the first words of this passage (shema=hear). For the ancient Jews, their creed was much more than a summary of their religious beliefs. It was a personal and national mission statement that shaped a Jewish person's identity and worldview. In reciting the shema, a Jew was basically saying, "This is who I am: I am not a pagan who worships false gods. I am an Israelite in covenant with the one true God over all the earth. All that I am and do flows from my relationship with this God.

We must recognize that the Christian creed we recite each Sunday is our shema. The Old Testament creed emphasized monotheism (the belief that the God of Israel was the one true God over all humanity.) The Christian creed is built upon the shema, but deepens our understanding of that one God existing as three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In continuity with the old shema, the Christian creed affirms that this one God—the Holy Trinity—is God over the entire human family and is at the center of every human's heart's deepest longing.

From a biblical standpoint, we must see that the Creed is much more than a routine statement of faith to be recited on Sundays. More to the heart of the matter, the Creed not only defines what we believe; it defines who we are. Indeed, it summarizes the story that gives meaning to our lives: the Father sent His Son to die for our sins and poured His Spirit into our hearts that we may be reconciled to Him in the Church.

The Creed is a prayer that is said at Sunday Masses and not on weekday Masses. I used to enjoy not saying the Creed because it was just one more thing. Now after reflecting on the above I find myself wanting to say more often at Mass. I have in many ways come to see the Creed as something similar to the Pledge of Allegiance. It saddens me and challenges me when I realize how many Catholic around the world are persecuted for believing the substance that makes up our Creed.

These basic truths from the Creed are not just abstract principles for our minds to grasp; they are the truths that should mold our hearts and guide our lives. United in Jesus Christ through His Holy Spirit, we sinners have become sons and daughters of the Father. This story of salvation certainly is worth retelling and celebrating on a regular basis! This is why we reaffirm our new identity in Christ each Sunday in the Creed. At this moment in the Mass, we stand up before the entire congregation, and before God, to make this public profession of faith and to recommit ourselves to live out all that the Creed represents in our daily lives.

These are the very things that led the Early Christian Martyrs to the arenas to be killed for their faith. The things that we proclaim in the Creed is why St. Thomas More was killed because he would not renounce them. St. Maximilian Kolbe living out the words of the creed found him trading his life for another man and dying in a Nazi starvation bunker. We should not recite these words lightly.

At this point of the Mass we gather together and offer prayers of petition to God not so much because God needs to know what we need but rather it is an expression of our trust that God cares about us and a way of expressing our unity as the family of God. It is a way of showing we care when we pray for a sick family member or a deceased love one. Their needs are our needs too.

The petitions at Mass are not meant to be news bulletins.

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November 24, 2019
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Next, the Eucharistic prayer reminds us that the Mass is much more than a human event, taking place in some church here on earth. Ultimately, the Mass is a participation in the heavenly liturgy. This is why the priest says, "And so we join the angels and saints in proclaiming your glory as we say..."

The Sanctus (Holy-Holy) is the prayer that is sung in heaven both in the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Revelation. Singing in heaven though is also a symbol of the harmony and accord that will be found in heaven. When we sing at Mass, our voices blend together as a sign of our unity.

The priest also repeats Jesus' important words from the Last Supper, "Do this in memory of me." With these words, Jesus is referring to the biblical notion of memorial. It is important to note that a Jewish memorial does much more than recall the past; it actually makes the past present mystically through liturgical worship, so that subsequent generations could participate in the foundational events in Israel's history. Consequently, when the Jews celebrated the Passover each year as a memorial, they believed that this pivotal moment in their history, the Exodus, was not only brought to their minds, but was actually made present to them. Some ancient Jews even said that when they celebrate the Passover, it was as if they themselves were walking out of Egypt with their ancestors in the Exodus.

As Catholics we believe that we are present at Calvary through God's power. We participate in Christ's one sacrifice on the Cross.

The Biblical understanding of peace (Shalom) is much more than the absence of hostility or war. Shalom expresses covenant solidarity, friendship, and right relationships. Friends who still harbor resentment toward one another, family members who have not forgiven each other, and spouses who cannot truly look each other in the eye do not have shalom. This ritual sign of peace thus challenges us to live out the words of the Our Father, by calling us to forgive and bring peace into our hearts, and into all our relationships, before we welcome the Prince of Peace into our souls in Holy Communion.

I am afraid that most people treat the Sign of Peace as a time of greeting their neighbor. This is what supposed to happen before Mass begins.

So when the priest at Mass says, "Happy are those who are called to this supper," he is not inviting us to any ordinary meal. He is passing on to us the angelic wedding announcement from the Book of Revelation. At this moment in the Mass, we are being called to the marriage supper of the Lamb. And when we walk up to receive Holy Communion, we are meant to play the role of the most honored Bride! Indeed, our divine Bridegroom unites Himself to us in the most intimate way possible here on earth by giving us His Real Presence, His own Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the Eucharist.

Are we happy to be at Mass? We don't show it by making a bee line for the door. We literally have divine life inside us. We are like the Blessed Virgin Mary as we have become living tabernacles of God.
