

A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri

1. THE CATHOLIC MASS - INTRODUCTION

The Mass is the central act of Christian worship - it is nothing less than the celebration of the Eucharist that Jesus institutes at the last supper when He commanded his apostles, "Do this in memory of me."

The celebration of the Mass clearly involves a real sacrifice - that of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who in his death on the cross offered his life as a total gift to the Father and redeemed the world. The Mass does not merely symbolize Jesus death on the cross; it sacramentally makes present Christ's redeeming sacrifice.

As our Catechism teaches, "In the divine sacrifice, which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner."

Jesus's own words shed light on the Mass as a sacrifice. On the night before He died, Jesus instituted the Eucharist as memorial of His death and resurrection and a pledge of His love. In the context of the Passover, he took bread and wine and spoke of them, respectively, as his body being given up and his blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He concluded the last supper by telling the Apostles to celebrate this meal as a liturgical memorial: "Do this in memory of me."

It is important to recognize that in Scripture, a memorial does not merely recall a past event, but makes the event real and present. Therefore, when Jesus said "Do this in memory of me," he was asking the Apostles to recreate the sacrificial offering of His body and blood. Indeed, it is His body and blood that was sacrificed on Calvary that is made present to us in the Mass.

A second aspect of the Eucharist is that it contains the real presence of Jesus. For in the Eucharist the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ is substantially contained. The Eucharist is not merely a sacred symbol of Jesus, or a reminder of Jesus. When the priest at Mass recites those words of Jesus at the moment of consecration, the bread and wine on the altar are changed into Christ's body and blood. So important was the partaking of his actual body and blood in the Eucharist that he taught, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." (Jn 6:53-56).

In the biblical Passover, a communal meal followed the sacrifice, and it was the shared meal that forged communion between the participants and God. We also expect the sacrifice in our Mass to find its culmination in a festive meal. (1 Cor 5:7-8). The catechism explains, "To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself to us." Indeed, holy communion is the most profound union we can have with God this side of eternity.

Thus, we see the Mass as a sacrifice, real presence of Jesus, and holy communion with him. With this background we can begin to better understand and appreciate the parts of the Mass.

A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri

2. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

We begin the mass with the sign of the cross. In making this sign, we invoke God's presence, continuing a sacred tradition that goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity.

There are two principal aspects of the sign of the cross: the actual tracing the sign of the cross over our bodies, and the words we recite while doing so. The first has roots in Sacred Scripture, particularly in book of the prophet Ezekiel, where a mysterious mark on the forehead was used as a sign of divine protection, and as a mark distinguishing the righteous from the wicked (Ez 8). Drawing on imagery from Ezekiel, the book of revelation depicts the saints in heaven as having a seal upon their foreheads. (Rv 7:3).

While signing ourselves, we call on God's name saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". In Scripture, to call on the name of the Lord is to invoke his presence and his power. That is why the ancient Israelites in calling upon the name of the Lord through many Psalms, offer to praise him, to thank him, and to seek his help in their lives. Like the Psalmist, we invoke his divine presence and ask for his assistance with our various struggles.

At the start of the liturgy, we invite God into our lives as we solemnly call on his name, invoking his divine presence and power. It is as if we are consecrating the next hour of our lives to the Lord, and saying that everything we do in the Mass, we do in his name. All our thoughts, desires, prayers and actions, we do "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Moreover, like the Israelites of old, we reverently call on God's name, asking for his help as we prepare to enter into the sacred mysteries of the Mass.

When we call upon the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we echo Jesus' great commission to the apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). These were the words spoken when we were baptized, and our souls were first filled with the divine life of the Holy Trinity. By repeating these words at every mass, we acknowledge that we are approaching Almighty God in the liturgy by virtue of the supernatural life God graciously bestowed us.

When the priest greets us with the words "The Lord be with you" he conveys the reality of Jesus' presence with the community of believers assembled in his name. For Jesus said "when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst" (Mt 18:20). With these words, the priest is also praying that the divine life we received at baptism may continue to grow within us.

The greeting "The Lord be with you" also recalls the words spoken to a whole roster of Biblical heroes who were called by God to a daunting mission. Think of Isaac and Jacob; Moses and Joshua; King David; the prophet Jeremiah; and the Blessed Virgin Mary. All of them heard this calling at pivotal moments in their lives. The words at the beginning of the liturgy can both inspire and encourage us, remind us of the high calling we each have, while assuring us that we have access to a higher power for support.

By responding to this greeting "And with your spirit" the people address the 'spirit' of the priest and acknowledge the Holy Spirit's unique activity through him by virtue of his ordination.

A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri

3. THE CONFITEOR

The ancient Israelites had three days to prepare to meet the Lord before He came to them in thunder and lightning to deliver the ten commandments. We too are called to prepare ourselves for a sacred encounter with the Lord every time we go to mass. Yet our meeting is more profound, for in the sacred Liturgy we encounter the very presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. And as we are not worthy to stand in His presence, the priest invites us to “prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries” by humbly confessing our sins publicly before almighty God and the congregation.

The prayer known as the Confiteor stands in a long Biblical tradition of confessing one’s sins. Sometimes in a public ceremony of repentance (Neh 9:2), or in a spontaneous response of an individual (Ps 32:5; 38:18). The practice of confessing one’s sins continued in the New Testament, which begins with crowds confessing their sins in John’s baptism of repentance. (Mt 3.6). James exhorts us to “confess your sins to one another, and pray to one another, that you may be healed” (Jas 5:16). The early Christians confessed their sins before partaking in the Eucharist, as recorded in the Didache, an early second century text.

In the Confiteor we confess our sins not only “to Almighty God”, but also “to you my brothers and sisters” as James teaches how our sins affect our relationship with each other. The Confiteor challenges us in four areas in which we may have fallen into sin.

First, “in my thoughts.” Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, gives several warnings about ways we can fall into sin in our thoughts. For example, we can sin through anger toward others; we can fall into adultery of the heart through our lustful thoughts (Mt 5:22; 5:27-28).

Second, “in my words.” The letter of St. James warns us that the tongue is a fire and can cause great turmoil. “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire (Jas 3:5). The bible teaches how many ways our speech can cause harm. For example, gossip (2 Cor 12:20); slander (Rom 1:30); insult (Mt 5:22); lying (Col3:9); boasting (Jas 4:16). These and other sins of speech are to be confessed in the Confiteor.

Third, “in what I have done.” This area encompasses sins whose actions directly hurt other people or our relationship with God. Along these lines, the Ten Commandments are often used as the basis for an examination of conscience.

Fourth, “in what I have failed to do.” This is the most challenging part. We are reminded that the Christian path is not merely avoiding sinful thoughts, words, desires and actions. Christianity is ultimately about the imitation of Christ. Jesus does not want us to merely avoid sin. He wants us to draw in his self-giving love.

Instead of simply saying I have sinned, the new translation of this prayer more closely reflects the Latin text of the Mass to underscore the seriousness of sin. So now we say “I have greatly sinned” in consort with David’s repentant words to God, “I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing” (I Chr 21:8). And we repeat it three times while striking our breasts in a sign of repentance. Therefore, at mass, we do not simply offer an apology to God, but humbly admit that we have sinned, “through my fault, through my own fault, through my most grievous fault.”

A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri

4. KYRIE AND THE GLORIA

The Scriptures reveal numerous accounts of individuals crying out for God's mercy: from David's plea in Psalm 51, to numerous examples of Jesus responding to calls of mercy in the New Testament. We understand mercy, therefore, as a petition, a prayer representing the cry of God's people for assistance.

As we prepare ourselves to enter the sacred mysteries of the liturgy, we do so in union with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints. In fear and awe over the divine presence drawing near, we cannot help but ask for God's mercy while repeating after the priest the petition of the *Kyrie Eleison*. "*Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy*"

While the *Kyrie* is primarily an expression of repentance, as with Biblical examples, it can be seen as a petition for God's assistance. We can entrust our own sufferings to the Lord in the *Kyrie*. But the Gospels also tell of people coming to Jesus requesting mercy for others. So we, too, can entrust to the Lord those we love every time we pray the *Kyrie* at mass.

The tone of the liturgy now shifts from sorrowful repentance to joyful praise as we pray the *Gloria*, whose opening line is taken from the words sung by the angels announcing the good news of Christ's birth. Thus, we prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus by repeating the same words of praise. The rest of the *Gloria* continues to be saturated with words from Sacred Scripture. It follows a Trinitarian pattern, beginning with praise of the Father who is addressed as "God Almighty Father" and "Heavenly King."

In praising the Lord as "Almighty" and Heavenly King," His omnipotence must be seen the context of his Fatherhood. God has what the Catechism calls a "fatherly omnipotence." God's powers in harmony with His loving will that always seeks what is good for us.

The next part of the *Gloria* tells the story of Christ. First, Jesus is addressed as "Son of the Father," and "Only Begotten Son," which recalls various New Testament texts that point to Jesus' divine Sonship, and brings attention to the prologue of John's gospel which announces that the eternal Word, who is God became flesh and dwelt among us." (Jn 1:1-4).

Next, the *Gloria* references Jesus as the "Lamb of God." It recalls the theme of the Lamb's triumph over sin and the devil in Revelation (Rv 5:6-14; 12:11; 17:14). The *Gloria* also addresses Jesus saying, "Lamb of God...you take away the sins of the world," repeating the words of John the Baptist when he first saw Jesus. (Jn 1:29).

Lastly, we praise Jesus in His unique position of authority: "You are seated at the right hand of the Father," recalling Mark's account of Jesus' ascending into heaven. (Mk 16:19).

The *Gloria* concludes with mention of The Holy Spirit, thus paying with homage to the Holy Trinity. In the *Kyrie*, we express our need for salvation and God's mercy. In the *Gloria*, we joyfully express our gratitude for having received salvation from Christ.