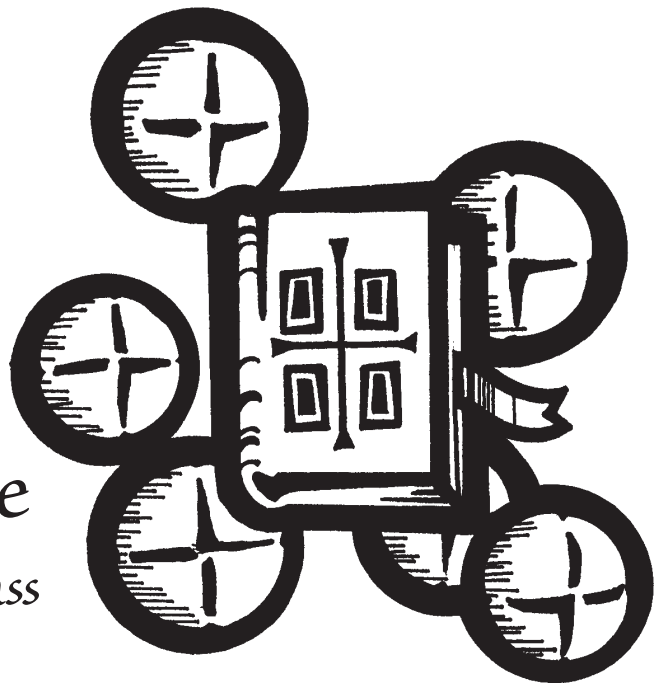


Give Thanks and Praise

A Popular Explanation of the Mass



Part 2

The Introductory Rites

No one comes to Thanksgiving dinner at the last minute and sits right down to eat...at least no one who is sensitive to the feelings of the hosts.

There is first the welcome at the door, hugs and kisses all around, the taking of coats and boots. There might be introductions, perhaps of a fiancée, a best friend from college, an aunt and uncle who haven't been seen by the family for many years. There are often new babies to hover over. And still before eating there is the telling of stories: the family history.

The celebration of Mass is similar for the Christian community. We never come in expecting just to sit down and immediately hear the scriptures. There are normal patterns, accepted things we do to get us in the proper mood, to help us begin, to prepare us for what follows.

Even before the first note is sung there is activity in progress. We are coming into the church. We are in the process of assembling. We are *gathering*. Perhaps we are greeted at the door by an "official" representative of the community. Many of us do it quite naturally on our own—beginning in the parking lot, in the doorways, in the aisles and pews. More and more we are becoming aware that before we can pray together, we have to *be* together.

We are also greeted by the decor, by the environment inside the church building. The hangings, the colors, plants and flowers, sacred art—all welcome us to the celebration and to the season at hand. Lilies, spring flowers, and water tell us that this is Easter before a word is spoken. The crib, evergreen trees, candles and gifts speak to us of Christmas. Environment and art are not expendable luxuries but necessary elements for our

prayer together. Christian public prayer addresses all our senses. It speaks to the whole person.

The Introductory Rites of the Mass continue this process of preparing us to become a true gathering of believers, an assembly united in heart and mind, a community within whose midst Christ is already present. The following are the various components of these rites.

Entrance

- Entrance Procession
- Veneration of the Altar
- Sign of the Cross
- Greeting and Response
- Introduction to the Mass of the Day
- Penitential Rite
- Sunday Renewal of Baptism
- Kyrie [Lord, have mercy]
- Glory to God

Collect

Although a time for common ritual preparation is very important, still these rites must be seen and celebrated as readying us for what is to come. Amid the many elements found here the Entrance Song and the Opening Prayer are often considered the most fundamental. The rites in between are more flexible.

Entrance Song: Singing, more than anything else, jells a gathering people into a unified body. Kiawanis and other service clubs know this well. They begin their meetings with song...something the members know and can sing with gusto.

We also begin our celebration with song, namely, the entrance or opening song. This is the first action that the

community undertakes as one body. Its purpose is to integrate the people, the ministers, and the mystery of the celebration. This song is so important—even more important than the procession—that we usually sing the text to the end.

Entrance Procession: The procession of ministers is a ritual entrance of the presiding priest and those who will serve the assembly in other ways during the celebration. The procession may be very festive or very simple, depending on the occasion. It always serves as a visual expression of the people being a community since every minister is first and foremost a member of the assembly.

Veneration of the Altar: The procession concludes with a reverence to the altar. The altar, of course, is the primary physical object in the church. It is a symbol of Christ who is the cornerstone and spiritual rock of the Church. It is also a symbol of the Christ who is present in his members. On some festive occasions we show our respect to this holy table through the use of incense since it is from the altar that prayer ascends like incense before God (cfr. Psalm 141:2).

Sign of the Cross; Greeting; Introduction to the Mass of the Day: At the end of the song we make the sign of the cross, a reminder that we are a people baptized in the name of the triune God. The greeting and response express that the Lord is indeed present among us. The optional introduction to the liturgy of the day should recall the special character of the celebration.

Penitential Rite: Here the whole assembly recalls that God is a loving God who is constantly extending to us his mercy and salvation. The presider first invites us to turn to the Lord who is gentle and compassionate. In silence we are then to look within ourselves, to reflect upon those areas of our life that in particular summon us to reconciliation with God and others. This reflection is followed by a common proclamation (e.g., the traditional “Confiteor” or a set of invocations) that we all need the healing grace of the Lord. The rite concludes by a spoken prayer of the presider requesting forgiveness. As the various texts printed in the sacramentary indicate, the primary focus of the rite is upon God and his gift of mercy, not upon human sinfulness. We confess that the Lord is a merciful Lord.

Sunday Renewal of Baptism: At all Sunday Masses the penitential rite may be replaced by the rite of blessing and sprinkling of holy water. This has some similarities with the “Asperges” (“Vidi Aquam” during Easter time) that many of us remember as occurring before the main Sunday Mass in parishes. This rite is a visual reminder of our baptism. It is also a reminder of the unique character of the Christian Sunday. We gather on Sunday to celebrate the paschal mystery of Christ, his and our passing over from death to new life. Every Sunday is a paschal feast celebrating the memorial of the Lord's resurrection which is the taproot of all reconciliation.

Lord Have Mercy: If the penitential rite does not include the “Kyrie,” then the assembly uses this formula to acclaim the risen Lord for his goodness and to implore his bounty on behalf of people everywhere.

Gloria to God: The Gloria, also called the “greater doxology” is an ancient hymn of the church that was originally used as an Easter song. Today we use it to emphasize the festive and special character of certain Sundays and feasts. The assembly expresses its joy, praises the Father for his glory, and requests the Risen Lord to hear its prayer.

Collect: The introductory rites are brought to a conclusion by the opening prayer. Conscious that we stand in the presence of God, we are now invited by the presider to pray in silence. This time of silence is integral to the prayer, and an adequate period must be allowed by the presider so that we have an opportunity to realize that we are in God's presence and to formulate our petitions. Then the presiding priest *gathers together* (the meaning of the Latin word “collect”) the unvoiced intentions of all in a prayer to the Father. This prayer is addressed to God the Father through the mediation of Christ (our High Priest and Advocate) in the Holy Spirit. This is our prayer, and we assent to it by our resounding “Amen,” a Hebrew word meaning “so be it.”

.....

These introductory rites, not all of which are used on every occasion, are important if we are to prepare ourselves to listen to God's holy word and share at the table of the Lord. We prepare ourselves not as numerous individuals who happen to gather to recite our private prayers with others in the same building. Rather, we gather and prepare ourselves as a people joined together in Christ through baptism and called together by the Father. From the very beginning of the celebration we are called upon to give heed to others, to be attentive to their presence, to make room for them in our lives. This is our privilege and our joy. This we are called to do because we are a Church, the believing people of God.