

Overview of The Mass

A thorough understanding of the Mass is necessary for you to properly approach your duties as a server. Here we will give a very quick overview of what the Mass is and outline its basic structure.

The Mass is a Gathering of the Body of Christ

The Church is the Body of Christ, with Jesus at the head of the body and each of us a member of it. Although each of us has a personal relationship with Jesus, we also need to come together communally to offer our worship to God. None of us should be alone in our faith, and the Mass is a time for the Body of Christ to gather together for our mutual edification.

The Mass is Public Worship

By our assistance at Mass, we give praise and worship to God. We reaffirm our reliance on his grace to sustain us, and we ask for his help for ourselves and for the world.

The Mass is Sacrifice

We are sinners. None of us are perfect. All of us fall short of what God intended us to be, and none of us are fit for heaven. We atone for our sins by offering sacrifice to God. We can offer our time, our worship and our worldly goods to God's service. The thing is, nothing we offer is good enough to fully atone for our sins.

Many years ago, God walked the earth in the person of Jesus. Jesus came to earth to offer himself as the one perfect sacrifice that could atone for the sins of all mankind. Although Jesus' sacrifice took place almost two thousand years ago he continually offers it to God the Father for our sake.

In the Mass, we have the great privilege of joining in Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. The priest, acting *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ), as he repeats Jesus' words at the Last Supper, re-presents the one Sacrifice to us. We are then able to participate in that same Sacrifice by bringing our offerings to the altar and by consuming the Body and Blood of Jesus.

The Mass is Ritual

ritual (noun) **1:** the established form for a ceremony; specifically : the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony **2a:** ritual observance; specifically a system of rites **2b:** a ceremonial act or action **2c:** an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner
(from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

The Mass being a ritual means that every action carried out in it has been planned. In some cases, we are repeating actions almost the same way that the Church has been performing them for centuries! Everything from the opening procession to the closing procession is prescribed and formulated in the Roman Missal, the Church's book of the Mass.

There is a great upside for you in this. Unless something happens to go wrong, you will *never* have to improvise your actions during the Mass. If you memorize the basic rituals of the Mass, you will rarely be surprised by what you have to do next.

Structure of the Mass

The Mass, like all rituals, is highly structured. The Church has established norms for the celebration of Mass that all parishes are expected to follow. You should be able to attend a Catholic Mass anywhere in the world and to understand the basics of what is going on, even if you don't understand a word that is spoken.

The Mass is divided into four parts: the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Concluding Rites.

Introductory Rites

The Introductory Rites begin with the entrance of the priest into the church and ends with the opening prayer (the Collect). There are some variations for certain days, but basically Introductory Rites follow this structure:

- *Entrance* (Celebrating priest and other ministers enter and proceed to the Sanctuary)
- *Reverencing of the Altar* (by the celebrant and other ministers)
- *Greeting* (Celebrant greets the congregation)
- *Penitential Rite* (The people recall their sinfulness)
- *Kyrie* (The people acclaim God and ask for his mercy)
- *Gloria* (An ancient hymn of praise to the Trinity. Omitted on most weekdays and on Sundays in Advent and Lent.)
- *Collect* (The celebrant reads a prayer from the Sacramentary for the Mass of the day)

Liturgy of the Word

In the Liturgy of the Word, the people listen to the Word of God in the Scriptures. The priest offers an exposition (homily) based on the lessons from the Scriptures, then the people reaffirm the rule of the faith and the Church offers prayers for itself and the world. The structure of the Liturgy of the Word is:

- Short period of *silence* after the Collect.
- *First Reading* (from the Old Testament or from a non-Gospel book of the New Testament).
- *Responsorial Psalm* (said or sung in response to the First Reading)
- *Second Reading* (usually omitted on weekdays)
- *Gospel Reading*
- *Homily*
- *Profession of Faith* (usually omitted on weekdays)
- *Prayer of the Faithful* (petitions offered by the Church for the Church and the world)

Liturgy of the Eucharist

This is the high point of the Mass. The people make their offerings to God and bring up bread and wine to be sacrificed on the altar. The priest changes the bread and wine in the the Body and Blood of Christ and offers it in sacrifice to the Father. The faithful receive the Body and Blood in Holy Communion. The elements of this rite are:

- *Preparation of the Gifts, or Offertory* (The altar is prepared, and the bread and wine is brought up to the altar. The people offer their contributions for the church or for the poor.)
- *Prayer over the Offerings* (The priest offers a prayer over the bread and wine)
- *Eucharistic Prayer* (A multi-part prayer of the priest and the people during which the bread and wine become the Body and Blood.) The basic elements are:
 - *Preface* (A short declaration of thanksgiving to God)
 - *Sanctus* (The people join with the angels in acclaiming God's glory)
 - *Epiclesis* (The priest invokes the Holy Spirit to come and consecrate the gifts)
 - *Institution Narrative and Consecration* (By repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, the priest carries out the Sacrifice that Christ instituted)
 - *Anamnesis* (The church calls to mind the mystery of our salvation, the suffering, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ)
 - *Offering* (The Church offers the Sacrifice to God. The people should also offer themselves to God)
 - *Intercessions* (The Church expresses that the offering is made on behalf of the Church throughout the world, and for all its members, living and dead)
 - *Final Doxology* (The priest and the people give a final acclamation of the glory of God)
- *Communion Rite* (Another multi-part ritual, wherein the Priest partakes of the Sacrifice and prepares it for distribution. The faithful who are properly disposed receive Holy Communion). It's parts are:
 - *The Lord's Prayer* (the Our Father. At the end, the priest adds an embolism "Deliver us, O Lord, from every evil..." to which the people respond with a doxology "For the Kingdom, the Power, etc.")
 - *Rite of Peace* (The Church asks for peace, and the members of the Church offer God's peace to each other to express communion)
 - *Fraction* (The priest breaks the Eucharist. The *Agnus Dei* or "Lamb of God" is recited or sung.)
 - *Communion* (The priest invites the faithful to the heavenly banquet. Those who are properly disposed receive under one or both species.)
 - *Prayer After Communion*

Concluding Rites

- *Announcements* (optional)
- *Greeting and Blessing* by the Priest
- *Dismissal* by the Deacon or Priest
- *Reverencing of the Altar* by the Priest and ministers
- *Closing Procession*