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## THE LITURGY OF THE WORD & THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

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*"Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures... And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight." – Luke 24:27, 30-31 (NABRE)*

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# The Mass: The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist

## Introduction

The Mass, also known as the **Eucharistic Liturgy** or the **Sacrifice of the Mass**, is the supreme act of worship in the Catholic faith. It represents the culmination of God's sanctifying work and humanity's worship, as grace flows for the sanctification of all. At its heart is the re-presentation of Christ's Passion and death—a sacrificial act of love and obedience to the Father on behalf of His Church.

The Mass is rooted in the Last Supper, where Jesus instituted the Eucharist as a lasting memorial of His death and resurrection, commissioning His apostles to continue this celebration. Thus, the Mass contains the Church's greatest treasure, making present the **Paschal Mystery**—Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension which is the central event of salvation.

In every Mass, **Christ Himself presides as the invisible High Priest**, with the visible Priest acting in His person. This underscores the dual nature of the Mass as both a **memorial and a sacrifice**. As a memorial, it recalls Christ's transformative act at the Last Supper and mirrors the Passover, symbolizing humanity's liberation from sin. As a sacrifice, it renews Christ's offering of Himself as the sacrificial Lamb, presenting His Body and Blood to the Father for the salvation of all, though now in an unbloody manner.

From the mid-second century, the structure of the Mass has remained consistent, divided into two principal parts: the **Liturgy of the Word**—with readings, homily, and intercessions—and the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**—in which the gifts are presented, consecrated, and received in Communion. This timeless structure embodies the unity of worship and sacrificial offering, bringing the faithful into communion with Christ and one another in the mystery of salvation.

Understanding the Mass as the Church's supreme act of worship and the re-presentation of Christ's saving work prepares us to enter into the liturgy with reverence and intentionality. With this foundation, we can now turn our attention to the unfolding of the Mass itself, beginning with the Introductory Rites. These opening moments gather the community and set the tone for the sacred celebration, drawing us together into a time set apart for God.

The Mass officially begins with the **Introductory Rites**, specifically at the **Entrance Procession** and the **Sign of the Cross**. Once the priest reaches the altar, he venerates it with a kiss, signifying reverence for Christ, who is symbolized by the altar itself. After reaching the presider's chair, the Priest begins the Mass by making the **Sign of the Cross** and offering the **greeting**, such as "The Lord be with you." This greeting establishes the communal and spiritual nature of the gathering, formally uniting everyone present in the worship of God.

## Introductory Rites

During this opening part, the Christian community, called together and united by the Holy Spirit, gathers to worship. It begins with the **Penitential Act**, where the community is invited to reflect on their lives, considering any personal faults, failings, or omissions. With humility, the faithful ask God for mercy and forgiveness of their **venial sins**. This moment of contrition prepares hearts for worship and is often followed by the "Gloria," a hymn of praise and adoration, glorifying each Person of the Blessed Trinity. The "Gloria" is omitted during the liturgical seasons of **Advent** and **Lent**.

## Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is a central part of the Catholic Mass, one of the two principal parts along with the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Following the introductory rites, which include the Penitential Act and the "Gloria," the Christian community gathers, united by the Holy Spirit, to hear God's Word. In the Penitential Act, the congregation reflects on their personal failings and asks for God's mercy, preparing their hearts

for worship. The “Gloria,” a hymn of praise to the Blessed Trinity, follows, and then the Opening Prayer is led by the priest, setting the focus for the Liturgy of the Word.

In the Liturgy of the Word, God speaks to His people through Scripture readings that follow the rhythm of the liturgical calendar. These readings, chosen to reflect the themes of the season, are drawn from the Old Testament, New Testament letters, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Each selection is intended to deepen the faithful’s relationship with God and to connect them with the history of salvation. The Liturgy of the Word begins with a reading from the Old Testament, which often foreshadows themes in the Gospel and illustrates the continuity of God’s covenant with His people from ancient Israel to the Church today.

After the Old Testament reading, the congregation joins in the Responsorial Psalm, a prayerful song that reinforces the themes of the readings. This response invites the faithful to meditate on God’s Word, echoing the message of the Scriptures in prayerful song. The second reading, typically taken from the New Testament letters or the Acts of the Apostles, reflects the teachings of the early Christian communities and fosters a sense of unity with the apostles and early believers.

At the heart of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel proclamation, where the congregation stands in reverence for the words and actions of Christ. Before the reading, everyone makes a small sign of the cross on the forehead, lips, and heart, symbolizing the desire that the Gospel be in their thoughts, spoken in their words, and cherished in their hearts. The Gospels represent the climax of God’s revelation, conveying the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Following the Gospel, the Homily is delivered by the priest or deacon, interpreting the readings and guiding the faithful on how these divine truths can apply to their lives. This teaching moment allows the faithful to reflect deeply on the Word and prepares them to enter more fully into the Eucharistic celebration.

The Liturgy of the Word then concludes with the profession of faith through the recitation of the Creed. Originating from the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., the Creed affirms the central beliefs of the Catholic faith, rooted in Scripture and Tradition, encompassing creation, redemption, and eternal life. Finally, the Prayers of the Faithful, or General Intercessions, follow. These prayers allow the congregation to lift up the needs of the Church, the world, the community, and individuals, demonstrating the unity of the Church in interceding for the salvation of all.

For those entering the Catholic Church, the Liturgy of the Word is an essential moment of listening and engagement with the divine. It reveals the Church’s foundations in Scripture and tradition, connecting the faithful to the ancient faith of Israel and the early Christian community, while uniting them in worship today. Through this encounter with God’s Word, the faithful are spiritually prepared to participate in the Eucharist, culminating their worship by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ.

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## **Liturgy of the Eucharist**

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the central and most sacred part of the Mass, where the faithful participate in the mystery of Christ’s sacrifice and receive Him in Holy Communion. For someone entering the

Catholic faith, understanding the significance, structure, and spiritual richness of this part of the Mass is essential, as it is where Catholics believe the real presence of Jesus Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—is made present on the altar.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the **Presentation of the Gifts**, also called the Offertory. Here, the faithful offer bread, wine, and their own prayers and sacrifices to God. These gifts symbolize the fruits of the earth and human labor, given to God to be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. This offering is also a sign of the faithful offering themselves to God, joining their lives with Christ's sacrifice.

Following the Offertory, the **Eucharistic Prayer** begins, the heart of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This prayer is a profound act of thanksgiving and praise to God, recalling His mighty deeds in salvation history, from creation through the redemption won by Christ. The priest, acting in the person of Christ and with the authority of the Church, invokes the Holy Spirit to consecrate the bread and wine. This invocation called the *epiclesis*, is a moment when Catholics ask God to make holy the gifts that are offered.

At the **Consecration**, through the words of institution—“*This is my Body... This is my Blood...*”—Catholics believe the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. This transformation is known as *transubstantiation*, meaning that while the appearances of bread and wine remain, their substance is wholly changed. This teaching is deeply rooted in Scripture, especially in Jesus' words at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-28) and His Bread of Life discourse (John 6:51-58). The Consecration is the moment in the Mass when Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is made present anew; it is not repeated, but Catholics participate in the one, eternal sacrifice of Jesus.

The **Memorial Acclamation** follows, where the congregation responds in faith, acknowledging the mystery of faith—Christ's death, resurrection, and promised return. The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with the *doxology* ("Through Him, and with Him, and in Him..."), giving glory to God in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and the congregation responds with a profound "Amen," affirming their belief in this great mystery.

The **Communion Rite** begins with the **Lord's Prayer**, which reminds Catholics of their identity as God's children and the call to forgive others as God has forgiven them. This is followed by the **Sign of Peace**, an expression of unity and reconciliation with one another before approaching the altar.

The **Lamb of God** prayer prepares the faithful to receive Christ in the Eucharist. In this prayer, the congregation acknowledges Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, echoing John the Baptist's proclamation of Jesus (John 1:29). The faithful then come forward to receive Holy Communion, which is both a personal encounter with Christ and a communal act of unity, joining with the whole Church. For Catholics, receiving Communion is the most intimate moment of the Mass, where they are united with Christ and the Church in a profound way.

Finally, after Communion, the **Prayer After Communion** concludes the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In this prayer, the priest offers thanks on behalf of the congregation and prays that the grace of the Eucharist will strengthen them to live out their Christian faith in the world.

For someone entering the Catholic faith, the Liturgy of the Eucharist reveals the profound mystery of God's love, the real presence of Christ, and the unity of the Church. It emphasizes that the Eucharist is not merely a symbol, but the true Body and Blood of Christ, given to nourish, sanctify, and unite the faithful in Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. In participating in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, Catholics are drawn into communion with Christ and with one another, strengthened to live out their faith in love and service to God and neighbor.

#### **Sources:**

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