



LITURGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE MASS TODAY



"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." (Acts 2:42, NABRE)

Theological Foundations of the Sabbath

The Sabbath is connected to **creation** and **covenant**. God's rest on the seventh day was His contemplative gaze upon His work of creation, especially its crown: man and woman. This rest was not divine inactivity but rather a deeper work of contemplation and the restful act of loving us (CCC 2184, 2185). Similarly, the Sabbath for us is intended as time for contemplation and worship of God, nourishing a love relationship with Him and with our neighbor.

Every human person, having been created by God, owes Him worship and thanksgiving for what He has done and continues to do. The Old Testament demonstrates the Sabbath as a day of worship to God and relaxation with one's family: "*Then you shall delight in the Lord and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth* (Is. 58:14)."

The Meaning of Liturgy

The word "liturgy" originally meant "public work" or "service in the name of/on behalf of the people." In the religious sense, it means "*the participation of the people of God in rendering acknowledgment and worship to God* (CCC 1069)."

Liturgy is not a matter of private prayer but a **public act of worship** by the faithful gathered together. In ancient Israel, the liturgy included remembering God's great works and singing praises for His love and mercy.

Jewish Roots of Christian Worship

By the time of Jesus, Jewish worship on the Sabbath included recitation of prayers, readings from Scripture, reflection on the lessons by a rabbi, and the chanting of psalms. The fullness of Jewish worship was the offering of sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem, reserved for priests, and observed on holy days and commemorations.

Early Christian Liturgy

The earliest Christian communities, composed mainly of Jewish converts, were accustomed to synagogue worship and celebrated the Eucharist in their homes:

"Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exaltation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people" (Acts 2:46-47).

Initially, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist was part of a meal known as the **Agape Feast** (or "Love Feast"), which commemorated the Last Supper. However, by the time of St. Paul, abuses had arisen (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20-33), leading to the separation of the Eucharistic celebration from the communal meal.

Development of Liturgical Practices

As Jewish Christians were no longer welcome in synagogues, they began to form assemblies akin to "Christianized synagogues," incorporating rituals such as readings, chanting of psalms, and exegesis. The Eucharistic celebration became the center of Christian worship and was moved to morning hours by the early 2nd century.

From the outset, the liturgy reflected the structure of the Last Supper. Bread and wine were offered, prayers were said, the words of institution recited, and the elements distributed. Initially, Eucharistic prayers were **improvised or extemporaneous** until the 4th century, when standardized prayers began to emerge.

Biblical Foundations of the Liturgy

- **Readings from Scripture:** “Attend to the readings, exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).
- **Homilies or sermons:** “When we gathered together to break bread, Paul spoke to them” (Acts 20:7).
- **Psalms and hymns:** “Singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts” (Col. 3:16).
- **Prayers for all:** “Supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving offered for everyone” (1 Tim. 2:1-3).
- **The Kiss of Peace:** “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (1 Cor. 16:20).
- **The People’s Response:** “To say Amen to your thanksgiving” (1 Cor. 14:16).

Refinements in Later Centuries

By the 4th and 5th centuries, Eucharistic prayers became more theologically developed and structured. Liturgical forms underwent significant refinement, culminating in the reforms of the **Council of Trent (1545–1563)**, which addressed decorum, devotion, and reverence in the liturgy. The Council codified the Roman Rite and prescribed strict rubrics for its performance, including an orderly presentation of lessons, Gospel readings, and prayers.

Observance of the Sabbath in Christian Tradition

The observance of the Sabbath was changed from the 7th day of the week, Saturday, to the 1st day, Sunday, from the time of the Apostles. It was changed for the sake of having a day dedicated exclusively to Christian service. Sunday extends the celebration of Easter throughout the year. It is meant to be illuminated by the glory of the Risen Christ. It makes present the New Creation brought about by Christ in His Resurrection.

The Mass Today

On April 3, 1969, Pope Paul VI approved the new Roman Missal, as called for by the **Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)**. The Mass today consists of two principal parts: the **Liturgy of the Word** and the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**:

- **Liturgy of the Word:** Introductory and Penitential Rites, Gloria, readings (including the Gospel), the Homily, Profession of Faith, and Creed. The readings are meant to awaken faith in the listener.
- **Liturgy of the Eucharist:** The offering of bread and wine, the Eucharistic prayer, invocation of the Holy Spirit, Consecration, Communion Rite, and Dismissal. Each Mass concludes with the mission to "go forth and serve the Lord with love of God and neighbor."

The **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy** (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) emphasizes that Christ’s faithful should actively participate in the liturgy, fully understanding its rites and prayers and engaging with devotion.

Conclusion

The Mass today is the culmination of centuries of development, rooted in the worship of the early Church and the traditions of ancient Israel. By participating in the liturgy, we praise and adore the

Father as the source of all blessings, make present the Paschal Mystery, and are drawn into communion with Christ and one another.

References

1. Holy Bible, New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE).
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC).
3. Council of Trent, "Decree on the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist" (1545–1563).
4. Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium" (1963).
5. Acts of the Apostles and Pauline Epistles (NABRE).