

# UNDERSTANDING WHAT WE DO AT MASS

## WHY HAVE THE MASS AT ALL??

Well, the mass was the central event in the life of the early apostles and disciples who knew Jesus. If you look at the book in the Bible called “The Acts of the Apostles,” which is the book of the Bible that talks about what happened right after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, you see that the first apostles, in Acts, chapter 2:46, had mass every single day. It was the central event for the faith life of the first Christians (the apostles and disciples who knew Jesus) and that, very simply, is why it is the center of our faith today as Catholics → because it was the center of the faith of those first Christians who knew Jesus.

Why was it the center of their faith? Because it was the ONE THING that Jesus asked his disciples to do in gathering together to pray after his time on earth was done. In Matthew, Mark, Luke and in Paul’s Letters we hear of the Last Supper when, the night before Jesus died on the cross, he took bread and wine and said that it was his Body and Blood and asked them to “do this...” (what came to be called the Lord’s Supper and then the mass) “...in memory of me.”

## THE PENITENTIAL RITE:

Since the beginning of the Church, Christians have said “sorry to God” at the beginning of mass.

*In a document called “The Didache,” from 70 AD, it is written: “Every Lord’s day (Sunday) you must gather and first confess your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure, and then break bread, and give thanks.”*

So, just like the first Christians back in 70AD, we start mass today by asking God for forgiveness and healing to better celebrate this gift, so we do the same thing today at mass as Catholics. This is the part of the mass where we respond “Lord have mercy,” and then “Christ have mercy” and then “Lord have mercy,” or where we begin a prayer that begins “I confess....”

**THE GLORIA:** *Next is “The Gloria,” based on the song the angels sang in Luke 2:13-14.*

## READINGS FROM THE BIBLE:

Next there are readings from the Bible. After the first two readings, all respond, “Thanks be to God.” And inbetween we have a Psalm from the Old Testament, in which the congregations participates by repeating a saying from the Psalm.

But then we have a last reading, which we will treat very differently: *Before the reading, 1. we all stand up* (standing is a sign of respect like all standing for a bride at a wedding.) *And 2. we sing “Alleluia,” which means “Praise God.”*

Then the priest or deacon greets everyone and all will say “And with your spirit” and then he introduces the reading and all say “Glory to you O Lord” while they make a cross on themselves on the forehead, the mouth and the heart.

Why all these special things for this last reading? Because the last reading is always from one of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – and the four Gospels have the **DIRECT WORDS AND ACTIONS OF JESUS** – so we make a bigger deal of them: We place importance on all of the Bible, but in a special way on the words and actions of Jesus, our Savior.

**HOMILY:** Then we have a sermon on the Scriptures we have just heard.

**CREED:** Then we proclaim our faith in “The Creed.” This was put together in 325AD by the leaders of the Church at a “council.” We have used the Creed at baptisms since then, and at Sunday and Holy Day masses for the last 1500 years.

**PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL:** Next we pray to God on behalf of the Church and world.

**PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS:** Next, members of the congregation, bring bread and wine up to the altar. We do this because Jesus used bread and wine at the Last Supper.

**SACRIFICE:** At the end of the preparation of the bread and wine at the altar, the priest says, “Pray, my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father” But a thought: In this prayer, we are talking about preparing for a sacrifice, but what does **that mean?** For Catholics, we say that Jesus dying on a cross is the **ONE** sacrifice that takes away our sins. And we say that, years later, that **ONE EVENT STILL** takes away our sins **TODAY:** So, we say that the **ONE** sacrifice on the cross, at Calvary, still takes away our sins today so it is **PRESENT TENSE.** It still is taking away our sins today.

In that way, then, we say the mass is a sacrifice, that in the mass we are participating in the **ONE** sacrifice of Calvary, knowing that it takes away our sins serve today.

We also say that, at the mass, we offer our **OWN SACRIFICES** to Jesus at mass: The struggles to be a good mom or dad or son or daughter or friend or Christian. That’s why, at this time in the mass the priest mentions “**OUR sacrifices**” during the mass....

**THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER:** Now we begin the prayer at the altar that is based on the **LAST SUPPER**, celebrated the night before Jesus died.

**I. WHAT DID THE EARLY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE ABOUT THE BREAD AND WINE BECOMING JESUS’ BODY AND BLOOD?** As we have already said, in the Bible the early Christians recorded, in the Gospels and in the Letters of Paul, references to the Last Supper where Jesus took the bread and wine, blessed them and said that they were his **Body and Blood.** Additionally, if you look at the very earliest writings of the first Christians, it is clear that they believed that the bread and wine used at mass literally, and not just symbolically, became the same **Body and Blood** of Jesus Christ our Savior. **For instance:**

**a.** In the Gospel of John, chapter 6, Jesus says “*I am the bread of life....this bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world.*” In fact, he says for his disciples to eat his

flesh six times, and four of the times he uses a word which we would translate as “to chew.” In reaction to these very words, Jesus causes almost all of his followers to leave him. This is what leads up to the Jesus saying to the twelve disciples, “*Will you also leave?*” and Simon Peter saying, “*You are the Savior, where else can we go?*”

- i. It would only seem reasonable that before leaving Jesus, the others who stopped following him would have talked with him about this “eating of his flesh.”
- b. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was born in 35AD, and was a personal friend of John the Apostle, and this is a historically provable fact, in Rome around 100AD, wrote: “The Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ” (To Smyrna 7:1)
- c. And “The First Apology of St. Justin,” again from 150 AD says, “*This food we call Eucharist ...we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as... the flesh and blood of...(our Savior) Jesus (Christ) (ch. 66).*”

**ETERNAL SONG OF THE ANGELS:** The Holy, Holy or Sanctus— Comes from Isaiah 6:3, which is the song the angels sang to the Prophet Isaiah when he was being called to be a prophet. So, two important pieces of the mass (the Gloria and the Holy, Holy) are based on songs of the angels. This reminds us, at mass, that there is an eternal song

**THE GREAT AMEN:** As we continue the Eucharistic Prayer we finally come to the “Amen.” We all sing that together. The word “Amen” means “So be it” or “I believe it.” So we are saying, at that time, that we believe all that has been said. It is considered to be the high point of the mass because it is the ultimate moment of affirming the faith on the part of the congregation. This is something we would REALLY SING OUT.

**LAMB OF GOD:** Why is Jesus called “The Lamb of God” during prayers in the mass? Well, “lambs” were a part of the story of the Jewish people fleeing Egypt and slavery in the Book of Exodus. In that story, lambs were sacrificed, and their blood put over the lintels of the doors of the Jewish people as part of their story of gaining freedom from slavery in Egypt. This story is remembered every year by the Jewish people in the celebration of PASSOVER.

It was at a Passover celebration (Mt 26:17) that Jesus was celebrating with his disciples when he gave it a twist and made it the “Last Supper.”

And so now Jesus was the “lamb” who was “sacrificed,” not just so that the Jewish people could gain freedom from slavery in Egypt, but so that ALL PEOPLES IN THE WHOLE WORLD would be set free from slavery to sin. So Jesus was the LAMB of God.

**FINAL DISMISSAL:** Years ago, the Latin words *Ite Missa est* were used to end the Eucharistic celebration. These words literally mean ‘Go, you are dismissed.’ Eventually, the whole Liturgy received its name, “the Mass,” from the word *Missa*. This reminds us the mass is for us to be strengthened in faith in order to get out into the world to spread the Gospel in the world.