

# WHAT HAPPENS AT MASS

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW

### The Big Picture

When we celebrate Mass (also called “The Eucharist”—meaning “thanksgiving”) we are continuing what Christians have done from the beginning. In St. Luke’s Gospel, in chapter 24, right after Jesus’ resurrection, we find him walking with two of his disciples who are leaving Jerusalem in despair. They witnessed the death of Jesus, but they could not see him walking with them, now alive. He speaks to them about the Scriptures—how the words of the Hebrew prophets and teachers in the Old Testament were really talking about him. And then he sits down with them at table where they recognize Jesus as he says the blessing and breaks the bread.

The Mass basically contains these two main parts—just as we see in the Gospel. In the first part, the Word of God is proclaimed, allowing us to see God working again in our lives. This part of the Mass is called the **LITURGY OF THE WORD**. It contains readings from the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures, from the letters and accounts of the first followers of Jesus, and from the Gospel.

The second part is called the **LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST**. It contains all the steps we do to present offerings of bread and wine to God in thanksgiving, the solemn prayer we make to God the Father that includes our remembering Jesus’ sacrifice, the rites surrounding Holy Communion (when the faithful receive and eat the consecrated Bread, and often drink the consecrated Wine), and then the dismissal of the congregation to live the fruits of the Mass in their daily lives.

So when you go to Mass, try to identify these two parts. The Liturgy of the Word, which takes up the first part of the Mass, ends with the prayers we make expressing our needs. The Liturgy of the Eucharist starts with the offering of our gifts (often with a collection) and goes through to the end.

As we look at the details of these two parts, try not to be overwhelmed. Basically we are celebrating the Word and celebrating the sacred Meal.

## DETAILS, PART 1, THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

*When you come to church, make yourself at home. It might be good for a friend to come along with you to help you feel comfortable. You will notice an altar in the front—the prominent table—and a lectern, as well as at least one chair for the priest who will lead the liturgy. Most churches today have pews, although some may have other kinds of chairs. Try to sit in an area where you can see what's happening and be in the middle of things.*

**Opening Hymn:** The Mass usually opens with a song. Find the hymn and join in the singing.

**Greeting:** The priest welcomes us and invites us to prepare for worship by disposing our hearts to God's love and asking the mercy of Jesus.

**Lord Have Mercy:** a short prayer in which the congregation responds to the petitions by saying: Lord Have Mercy. The congregation may also say a prayer called "I Confess."

**The Gloria:** this is often sung on Sunday, but it may be recited by the congregation. It prepares us for the readings by showing the praise we have for God in our hearts, and the joy we have because of God's love for us.

**Opening Prayer:** A short prayer, called "the Collect," that expresses the prayers of the congregation. The celebrant says or sings this. Listen to the themes expressed in this prayer which both praises God and asks God's help.

### The Readings:

- **FIRST READING:** an excerpt, usually from the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures. (During Easter time, this reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles which tells about the early days of Christian life after Jesus.) Many parishes have books with the readings in them to help the congregation follow along.
- **Psalm:** a selection from one of the Psalms (150 Jewish songs of praise) is sung (or said) as an initial acceptance of God's Word in the first reading.
- **SECOND READING:** an excerpt from one letters or accounts that reflect the lives of the first followers of Jesus. This selection usually gives encouragement and advice on living in accord with the teachings of Jesus.
- **Alleluia:** a short hymn of praise as the congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel.
- **GOSPEL:** a selection from one of the four Gospels read in a solemn way by a deacon, priest or bishop. The congregation stands to show both its respect for God's Word in Jesus Christ, and also as a sign of willingness to hear and live out that Word.

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**Homily:** usually a priest or deacon helps the congregation reflect on the Word of God.

**Creed:** the congregation recites an ancient formula of faith in response to the Gospel saying that it believes in God the Father, our creator, in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, and in the Holy Spirit who enlivens and makes holy.

**Prayer of the Faithful:** a set of requests which the congregation makes asking for God's help in our lives.

## DETAILS, PART 2, LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

*You will notice a change as we move to the second part of the Mass. There will no longer be readings from the scriptures. Rather, a very sacred tone signals the start of the solemn prayer of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This part of the Mass expresses the way the congregation makes itself one with Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection, through the solemn prayer recited by the priest or bishop. This prayer offers God all of our praises, through the loving self-offering of Jesus Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit. Three central things happen: gifts are presented, the solemn prayer is recited, and the congregation receives Holy Communion. After this, the Mass ends rather simply.*

**Presentation of the Gifts:** the congregation brings to the altar bread and wine, the food Jesus used at the Last Supper, as a sign of its desire to give itself to the following of Jesus. On Sundays, most congregations take up a collection to provide resources for the services and charity of the congregation. This collection is the way the congregation shares in building up the Kingdom of God.

**Pray Brethren:** The priest invites the congregation to pray that God will accept the gifts we bring as signs of our love by God.

**Offertory Prayer:** a short prayer recited by the celebrant to prepare the congregation for the central prayer of the Mass.

**Eucharistic Prayer:** the central prayer of the Mass in which the congregation expresses thanks to the Father by joining itself with the sacrificial love of Jesus.

It contains these elements:

- **Preface:** the introductory prayer which expresses the theme of our thanksgiving.
- **Epiclesis:** the celebrant asks the Holy Spirit to come down upon the gifts and the congregation. Look for the priest to extend his hands forward.
- **Thanksgiving and Commemoration:** the prayer continues in thanking God by remembering Jesus, particularly on the night before he died when he gave the sacred Bread and blessed Cup of wine to his disciples. Listen for the words: “This is my Body; this is my Blood.” Look for the priest to raise the Bread and the Chalice so the congregation can adore Christ present at the Mass.
- **Petitions:** solemn prayers for all believers whether living or departed, all leaders of the Church, and for the world.
- **The Doxology:** the concluding words of praise to God—Father, Son, and Spirit—which expresses our total dedication. The congregation sings or says a powerful Amen in response to this.

**The Communion Rite** involves preparation for communion, a greeting of peace, the reception of Holy Communion, and a prayer after communion.


It contains these elements:

- **The Lord's Prayer:** the congregation recites the prayer Jesus taught his disciples as a way to prepare to receive communion.
  - **Greeting of Peace:** the celebrant or deacon asks the congregation to express its love in Jesus Christ. This shows part of the meaning of Holy Communion, the unity that all believers have in Jesus. Receiving Holy Communion is a commitment to the love and peace of Jesus Christ.
  - **Lamb of God:** a short prayer repeated by the congregation—usually sung—asking Jesus to give extend mercy and peace on us.
  - **Behold the Lamb:** the celebrant raises the blessed Bread and Chalice to help the congregation concentrate on receiving Holy Communion.
  - **Communion:** the congregation comes forth, usually standing before a minister, to receive the consecrated Bread, and often receives the consecrated Wine from a chalice. This is a very sacred moment. Only people free from serious sin, and who are in union with Christ and his Church, come forward.
  - **Post-Communion Prayer:** a prayer said by the celebrant after Communion which expresses thanks to God and asks God to help us carry out the meaning of Communion in our daily lives.
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**Blessing:** the priest or bishop asks God's blessing upon the congregation as it prepares to leave.

**Dismissal:** the deacon or celebrant announces that the Mass is ended and reminds the congregation to live out the meaning of the Mass in their daily lives.

**Final Hymn:** join the assembly in singing a hymn before departure.





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