



The Mass in Slow Motion



The Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts

This is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

And now we come to the heart of the matter. As important and precious as the Word of God is, it all points here: the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, and now, the Word we have heard, Jesus Christ, will become Flesh and Blood for us to receive. The Eucharist distinguishes Catholicism sharply from Protestantism. Almost all Protestant (and Evangelical) denominations deny that Christ is truly present in the Holy Eucharist. They believe in only a symbolic presence and, since they also reject the ministerial priesthood, they cannot have the true presence because there is no validly ordained priest to bring forth the Most Blessed Sacrament of the true Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus. For these and other reasons, most Protestant denominations minimize the reception of communion celebrating what is a merely symbolic ritual once a month perhaps. (Many Evangelical “word” churches have no ritual of communion at all). For Catholics, however who believe in and have the Lord truly present, it would be unthinkable to go to Mass on Sunday and not receive Holy Communion, Christ gathers us not just to teach us in the Liturgy of the Word, but also to feed us on his Body and Blood, the necessary food without which we perish (*cf* John 6:53). Jesus has prepared a table for us in the sight of our enemy, the devil, our cup is overflowing (*cf* Ps 23).



For, indeed, at the Last Supper Christ instituted the paschal (Easter) sacrifice. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of the cross is continually made present to the Church when the priest, representing Christ, carries out what the Lord did and commanded his disciples to do in his memory. Christ took the bread, blessed and broke it, and giving thanks, gave it to his disciples saying, “Take and eat, this is my body.” And of the Chalice filled with wine he said, “Take and drink, this is the chalice of my blood.... Do this in memory of me.” The Church has arranged the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy to correspond to these words and actions of Christ:

1. In the preparation of the gifts, bread, wine and water are brought to the altar, the same elements which Christ used.
2. The Eucharistic prayer is the hymn of thanksgiving to God the Father for the whole work of salvation; the offerings become the Body and Blood of Christ. It echoes the priestly prayer that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper and which John’s Gospel records extensively.
3. In communion the faithful receive the Body and Blood of Christ as the apostles did from his hands.

Hence, the focus of the Mass now shifts from the Lectern and the celebrant’s chair to the altar which is about to be prepared. This is a visual indication that a new part of the Mass is about to begin.

Preparations – It should be evident that the opening movements of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are essentially a practical matter. The altar is prepared, and gifts are brought forward and offered. While there are prayers and some accompanying ritual gestures, it will be noticed that the rite is almost stark in its simplicity and very task oriented. But this does not mean it is without symbolism and as we shall see there has been an instinctive elaboration of the offertory that often includes processions and the like. This expresses a basic religious need, namely that in giving of the essentials of life for a sacrifice, the giver gives himself and so wants to be part of the act of offering.

First the altar is prepared. The altar is the center of the entire Liturgy of the Eucharist. Note that the altar is to be covered with a cloth. The design and style of this cloth will vary with the design of the altar. The front may or may not be covered but the top surface of the altar is to be covered by at least one cloth. Surely there is a nodding to the meal experience here. We seldom eat a formal meal on a bare tabletop. The altar cloths also allude to Christ’s burial cloth and thus also points to the sacrificial nature of the Mass. The rubric above seems to imply that the altar has been covered all along. Today the cloth is usually left upon the altar but in the earliest days it was more the custom to remove it after Mass. This is still done on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, but generally, the altar stays covered even when it is not in use. The altar in every church should ordinarily be a fixed altar located in such a way as to be the focal point on which the whole congregation naturally centers.



A fixed altar is one that is immovable. A pastoral reflection on this would be that the altar, as well as the pulpit, represent perpetual values that do not change and hence, their fixed location should reflect that fact. Likewise, this will prevent us from the somewhat embarrassing temptation of moving them when they “get in the way” of some assembly or concert in the church. Not all these norms can be perfectly observed in older churches which have fixed altars from a previous period which are not free-standing but are attached to the back wall.

There is a practice of placing, within the altar, relics of the saints. This helps us to appreciate the communion of the saints which is most perfectly experienced in this life during Holy Mass and Communion. On the altar are placed the corporal, the purificator, the chalice, and the sacramentary. Each of these is discussed in turn.



The Corporal is a square linen cloth (usually 12 to 15 inches square) which is placed in the center of the altar along the back edge. It gets its name from the Latin word “Corpus” (Body) since it is upon this cloth that the paten and the chalice containing the Lord’s Body and Blood rest. The purpose of this cloth is to help in catching any small particles of the host or drops of the precious blood. At the end of the Mass, the corporal is carefully folded so that no particles will not fall to the ground or be scattered upon the altar cloth. This is important because the Lord is contained even in the smallest particles of the sacred species and should be thus treated with the greatest reverence. The corporal normally rests on the altar only during mass and is reverently removed after communion. The picture at left shows a corporal upon which rests a chalice.

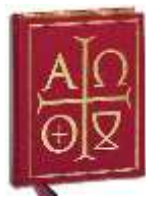


The Purificator is another piece of cloth, narrower than the corporal. This gets its name from the Latin verb “purificare” (to purify) since it is used to help cleanse the sacred vessels. Since, once again, we are handling the sacred Body and Blood of the Lord, a special cloth is used which will later be laundered in a special and reverent way. Note how every care is taken to handle even the smallest portions of the sacred species.



The Chalice gets its name from the Latin (via the French) word Calix which means literally, “cup” but in English the word has the special meaning directed toward the special cup in which will be contained the precious Blood. Therefore, as a general rule it is not an everyday cup nor does it merely resemble one. Indeed, all the sacred vessels hold places of honor, especially the chalice and paten since they are used in presenting and consecrating the sacred species. They should be made of solid materials which are considered noble in a particular region. Likewise, they should not be easily breakable. Understandably, they should also be of a material that is non-absorbent at least insofar as the inside of the cup. The form of the vessels should be suited to sacred use and be considered appropriate for divine worship. Use is not to be made of simple baskets or receptacles which are more ordinarily meant for use outside of sacred celebrations. Simple pottery, generally, would seem to be inappropriate.

Consider that in our region, few people who held a formal dinner would think to set out pottery because it is considered inelegant. So much more so for the Mass. Further, chalices that resemble secular wine glasses or cocktail glasses are also excluded. Chalices should never be easily breakable. “The Chalice should be covered with a veil, which may always be white.” Once the chalice is brought to the altar and readied for use, it is unveiled. This is an ancient custom and emerges from reverence due the sacred vessels. Traditionally they were kept covered when not in use.



The Missal is the book containing the prayers, formulas and rites for the celebration of Mass. It also contains Masses for special occasions and various blessings. It is the book used only by the celebrant. In the Older Tridentine Mass, the Book was on the Altar from the beginning of the Mass to the end. But, in the current liturgy the Altar is not formally “used” until the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Missal is the authoritative source for all liturgical actions of the Mass and must be faithfully followed. This is essential if the Mass is truly to be our source and sign of unity. Hence, to change it is to move against the universal unity of the Church. There are many pastoral problems that can arise due to tampering with the norms and directives or prayers in the missal.

The altar, having been prepared, we now begin the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

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Mass schedule: Sundays: 8 am, 9:30 am, 11 am & 7 pm; Saturdays: 8 am & 4:30 pm; Daily: 7 am in the chapel