

INTRODUCTION

Many Catholics, as well as people who are thinking about joining the Church, have questions about the Mass. Some of these questions stem from curiosity about why and how we do what we do. Some are more pastorally urgent—issues that really bother people, or hinder them from praying the Mass deeply. This booklet can help you to think through your own questions and ideas and to participate in the Mass with a fuller sense of what we’re doing together.

Ever wondered why we Catholics call our primary worship service “Mass”? After all, a “mass” is a clump of something—hardly a good descriptor for what we do at church.

The term is ancient. St. Ambrose in the fourth century used it. It may have had its origin in the dismissal at the end of the eucharistic liturgy. When Mass is in Latin, the priest’s final line is, “*Ite, missa est*,” meaning, in essence, to go and live the liturgy in our lives. “*Missa*” slid into English as *the Mass*, into Spanish as *la Misa*, into French as *la Messe*, and into many other languages.

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The Mass evolved, starting as a home-based celebration. By the second century, the Mass already had a lot of the ritual structure that we still use. But through historical events and cultural changes, the Mass often became a grand ceremony—and, for the common people, a rather remote one, done *for* them by the holy people up at the altar, in a language (Latin) that was no longer their common tongue.

There was a lot of regional variety in the ways the Mass was celebrated. But after the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church saw a need to standardize the Mass. So the

Council of Trent (1545–1563) prescribed an exact formula. This is what we still call the “Tridentine” Mass. From then until the late 1960s, you could walk into a Roman Catholic church anywhere in the world and hear a mostly identical Mass, in Latin.

A liturgical reform movement began in the early twentieth century. But the big changes, such as Mass being in the local language, came after the Second Vatican Council. So this is the Mass as we have it today. Let’s explore it.

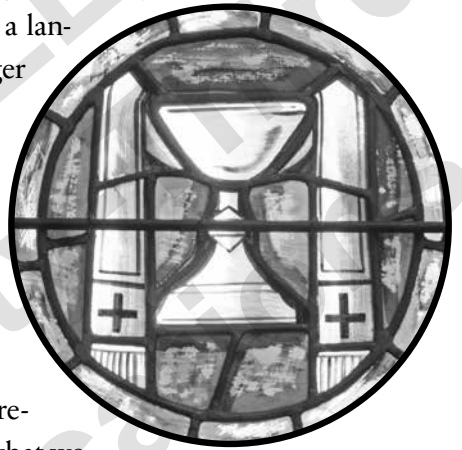


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Structure of the Mass

What are the parts of the Mass?

How do they fit together?

Here are the basic parts.

Introductory Rites

Whenever people gather for any organized purpose, from concerts to political meetings to church services, the event usually starts with an introduction. The first part of the Mass functions this way. It helps unite us as a community and prepares us to listen to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist. The entrance procession gets our attention. We sing. We make the sign of the cross. We get ready by calling to mind our sins and praying for God's mercy and forgiveness. We give glory to God, and we unite in prayer as the priest leads us in the Collect prayer.

Liturgy of the Word

God becomes present in the proclamation of the Bible readings. "Proclamation" is a key word here. We hear the readings and then listen to the preaching. God acts in our human activity, as we use our minds and voices. We are cooperating with God to bring the living Word to each other and to the world. We respond by recommitting to our faith as we pray the Creed. We respond by praying for our needs and the needs of the whole world in the Prayer of the Faithful.

Preparation and Presentation of the Gifts

While we sing an offertory hymn, the collection basket is passed around, and the altar is prepared. Members of the congregation bring up the bread and wine and the donations. This is more than

just a way to get the props in place. The bread, wine, and donations stand for our willingness to give ourselves to God and give ourselves in service to the whole world.

Eucharistic Prayer

We “lift up our hearts” and sing the “Holy, Holy Holy.” Then the priest prays the eucharistic prayer, remembering the saints who have gone before us and God’s saving acts throughout history, culminating in Christ’s gift of his life and death, of his Body and Blood. We call on the Holy Spirit. In the Mass, time collapses. Every time we celebrate the Mass, it really happens—we’re there at the Last Supper; we’re there at the cross; we’re there at the empty tomb and see the risen Christ. We give thanks (the word “eucharist” means “thanksgiving”). We pray for and with the whole Church, including those who have died. We pray for the whole world.

The priest prays this prayer in the name of the whole community; we add our voices at various points, and we confirm that this is our prayer too when we sing the “Great Amen” at the end.

Communion Rites

We come to the table. We “take and eat” the Body and Blood, exactly as Jesus told us to do. God has been alive in us, sacramentally, ever since our baptism, and Eucharist intensifies our connection to God and to one another.

Dismissal Rites

Like other events in which people participate, the Mass has a wrap-up and a sending forth. The priest blesses us with the sign of the cross, and sends us out into the world to love and serve the Lord.

Why Do Catholics *Have* to Go to Mass?

Why do Catholics have to go to Mass every Sunday and on holy days? What happens if we don't?

“Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day” is the Third Commandment. We Christians celebrate our Sabbath on Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. We keep the Sabbath by engaging in communal worship services. It is meant to be a day of rest, prayer, and renewal.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics were taught that if we missed Mass for no good reason, it was a mortal sin, enough to send us to hell.

The Church no longer teaches that missing Mass is a definite ticket to hell, but it is still Church law that missing Mass without a serious reason is a “grave” sin. A “grave” sin is not necessarily a mortal sin; these are slightly different, overlapping categories, and one’s conscience has a role to play in sorting this out. The bottom line is that Catholics are still required to go to Mass. But it is permissible to miss Mass for a serious reason—for example, if you are sick, or caring for a sick child, or if you’re traveling and not near a church.

The core issue here is that a focus on Mass as a legally required behavior misses the point. So does attendance based solely on the fear of hell. We worship because we are overwhelmed with gratitude for God’s love. We worship because it helps us remember all that God has done for us. We worship because it helps to form us into the people—the body of Christ—whom God calls us to be. We worship together, bringing our needs, our griefs, our repentance, our fears, our joys, and our hopes. We connect with God, who meets us in our lacks and our longings, and with the faith community in which we find mutual support.

The Power of the Mass

*How am I changed by participating
in the Mass?*

We are changed in many ways. For example, our sins get forgiven. At least, they do if they're not "mortal" sin, a sin so serious that it cuts us off from God and the human community. But most of us are not running around committing mortal sins on a regular basis. On the other hand, none of us is perfect; our lives are littered with moments when we do wrong, or fail to do good. That's why we have the "penitential act" at the beginning of Mass, when the priest calls us to examine our recent behavior in the light of the gospel, and we pray "Lord have mercy," and the prayer that begins "I confess to Almighty God..." So we're starting out the Mass by asking God's forgiveness for our sins. Christ becomes present. We receive the Eucharist, and are sent out, cleansed by what God and we have just done. (This doesn't mean, however, that the penitential act at Mass takes the place of the sacrament of reconciliation. Confession is a vital and powerful way we experience the presence of the risen Lord and open ourselves to God's love and mercy.)

This is not the only way we are changed in the Mass. Through the Mass, just as the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord, so we too are gathered up by the Holy Spirit and transformed into the body of Christ. By participating in the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising, we are given a share in Christ's divine life, and we become a little more able to live his life in our own.

Confession Before Communion?

| *Do I need to go to confession before
I can receive Communion?*

It depends. As Pope Francis has emphasized, the Eucharist isn't meant to be a prize for the perfect, but, rather, medicine for sinners.

But we also have St. Paul's concern that you should not receive Eucharist if you have done something seriously evil (1 Cor 11:27–28). If you have, then you need to re-establish your relationship with God and the community before receiving Eucharist. But even if you are burdened with mortal sin and have not yet been to confession, if you are truly sorry, and if you're in some sort of emergency situation, the Church does allow you to receive communion; you then need to go to confession as soon afterward as you can.

Somehow, this got twisted around in the Catholic imagination, and people got to thinking that *any* level of sinfulness barred them from Communion. So, for centuries, most people did not routinely receive Communion at Mass. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X urged Catholics to receive Communion frequently, even daily. But plenty of Catholics still thought that they shouldn't go to Communion unless they were free even of small sins. So we had people coming to Mass every Sunday but not receiving Communion unless they'd been to confession on Saturday. Fortunately, in more recent decades the Church's actual teaching on Eucharist has made headway, and most people at Mass do receive Communion.