

WHAT IS THE MASS? WHY GO FROM SITTING
TO STANDING TO KNEELING? WHAT IS THE
PURPOSE OF INCENSE? WHY DO CELEBRANTS
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THIRTY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MASS

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Printed in U.S.A.

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Thirty Questions About the Mass

Julia Dugger

“People are beginning to forget why we do what we do during the Mass, such as the reason for pouring water into the wine.” These were the words of a daily communicant. His comment was thought-provoking. I wanted to know more about the Mass myself. Did other people have the same questions? What were the questions most would want answered? This pamphlet attempts to answer thirty questions most frequently asked about the Mass.

GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MASS

What is the Mass?

At different times our definition of the Mass changes because of an altered emphasis. I have in front of me a *Baltimore Catechism*, published in 1941. Its definition emphasized sacrifice: “The Mass is the sacrifice of the New Law in which Christ, through the priest, offers himself to God in an unbloody manner under the appearances of bread and wine.” This is certainly true.

The Second Vatican Council, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, told us that the Mass “is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body the Church” (#7). Words that we use today to define the Mass usually follow Vatican II, pointing out the importance of the Body of the Church, the assembly, the community that gathers together. This is another valid and extremely important insight. Those living, however, in New Testament times might have spoken just as truly of a meal at which bread was broken. The Mass reflects the particular needs of a particular time. Our definition of the Mass reflects these needs too.

The heart of the Mass is always mystery. The mystery is that Jesus Christ is actually present among us. He is present in the presider. He is present in the Eucharist itself, in the bread and the wine that strengthen us and help us to show him forth to others. He is present in his Word, the Scriptures. He is present in all of us gathered together as we pray, sing, and perform the actions of the Mass. It is hard to define a mystery, but one general answer to “What is the Mass?” might always be “Jesus Christ, present among us.”

When did the Mass begin?

Today there is a great interest in roots, in tracing the lines of particular families back to the past. The

roots of the word Mass lie in the word *Missa*, a Latin term used at the end of the Eucharistic service and meaning “dismissal.” *Missa* finally came to be used to signify the entire Eucharistic event. The roots of the Mass celebration go back to the first realization of humans that thanksgiving and praise should be offered to the Creator. (The word Eucharist comes from the Greek *eucharistia*, which means “thanksgiving.”) The greatest of the Jewish family feasts of thanksgiving and praise was the Passover, reliving the Exodus that established the Jews as the covenant People of God who were saved by God’s power.

The gospels tell us that at the Last Supper the night before Jesus died, he instituted the Eucharist. The Scriptures also show us that the Eucharist was celebrated from the very beginnings of the Church as a supper, probably held in the early afternoon like the customary Roman suppers. Later the Mass was celebrated in the morning on the day after the Jewish Saturday Sabbath, and as the Church grew and the early members of the Church died, the celebration was formalized so that it could be passed on to others.

Why should we go to Mass?

This is the most often-asked question about the Mass. The third commandment tells us, “Remem-

ber to keep holy the sabbath day” (Exodus 20:8). The Catholic Church also specifically commands us to assist at Mass on Sunday and on all holy days of obligation. Why? The celebration of the Mass is the center of Christian life. From the start of the early Christian Church, people have assembled together to celebrate the Eucharist. Attending Mass shows that people believe in God, that they believe God should be thanked and praised, and that they wish to be strengthened by the Eucharist. Taking part in the liturgy of the Mass is most important to being a Christian. By not attending Mass a person withdraws from the Christian community and rejects Jesus who is present in the sacrifice. The reforms of Vatican II have taught us especially that God is actually present in the assembly. A failure to be part of this assembly is a serious failure, for we spurn both God and one another.

Why should we go to Mass on holy days of obligation?

Holy days of obligation are community celebrations of God’s love. The word holiday comes from holy day. Holy days are intended to be religious holidays, times to rejoice in the special ways in which God has revealed himself to the particular Christian country in which we live. All countries do not have the same holy days, just as they do not

have the same secular holidays. In the United States there are three Marian holy days. During these days we celebrate our belief that Mary is the Mother of God (January 1); our model who followed God's will (the Immaculate Conception, December 8); and the person who has risen to glory as we too hope to rise (the Assumption, August 15). We also celebrate Jesus' Ascension; the eternal triumph of the saints (All Saints' Day, November 1); and Christmas. It is important to celebrate Mass on each of these holy days because each shows the assembly the presence of Christ in an important way — one that the Church sees as helping us bloom more abundantly where we are planted.

Why were so many changes made in the Mass?

Over the years since the Church began, the Mass had become less and less an action of a celebrating community. During the Middle Ages there was a feeling that ordinary laypeople were unworthy of contact with God. God was remote and mysterious. The divinity rather than the humanity of Christ was emphasized. (Church architecture reflected this with altars built farther and farther from the "unworthy" congregation.) The people attending Mass received Communion infrequently, if at all. The situation became so acute that

a Church rule had to be made saying that the faithful must receive Communion once a year. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, there was a renewal of interest in the Church as community, the biblical basis of Church traditions, and the liturgical year as a source of personal renewal. During the early twentieth century Pope Pius X issued decrees urging frequent Communion. In 1947 Pius XII stressed the importance and necessity for frequent Communion and the priestly office of all Christians. A German liturgical commission sparked reforms in Europe, laying a foundation for the renewal based on the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963). The use of the altar in today's churches summarizes this century's changes. It is placed close to and facing the congregation, who gather around this table for a meal as in New Testament times. All are united in worship using language, symbols, and gestures designed to foster community participation and individual and group spiritual growth.

How is the "new" Mass different from the "old" Mass?

The many differences in today's "new" Mass from the "old" Mass show the direction the Church is moving in Eucharistic worship. To summarize

rather than itemize these differences, today's Mass has generally much greater lay participation than in the past. The assembly unites in ministry during the Mass. One example of the new versus the old Mass: All can now *hear* the Mass with much greater ease regardless of education because it is no longer in Latin but in the vernacular language of the people.

Why do we go from sitting to standing to kneeling? Why do we stand for the gospel but not the other readings? Why do we stand for Communion? In some churches, why do we no longer kneel?

During the Mass standing is a sign of reverence. Just as you might stand in respect when introduced to an important person, you also stand when meeting Christ in the gospel, when receiving the Eucharist, and at other times when in important conversation with God (such as the Nicene Creed). Standing at prayer is a traditional posture. It was used in the time of Jesus, and even today many European churches contain no kneelers. A time for sitting is usually a time for listening and reflecting. Sitting is used at certain times during the Mass because it is the logical thing to do. Bowing at times for blessing was practiced for many years in the Church. It is still used at times in the Eastern Mass

and was replaced by kneeling in the Western rite. There is, however, a movement today to reserve kneeling as a penitential gesture, as it was in New Testament times. Some churches have no kneelers because standing and sitting fulfill the basic needs of the congregation for reverential worship.

What is the purpose of using incense?

Let my prayer come like incense before you.
(Psalm 141:2)

Incense, an aromatic substance, such as resin burned as a perfume, has been used in worship long before the time of Jesus. The smoke of incense rising up during religious ceremonies is a symbol for the sweet perfume of the prayers of the faithful lifted up to God. Incense is used in the Mass, especially as a sign of reverence. The gospel is sometimes incensed before it is proclaimed during Mass. Incense also is used to symbolize the sacrifice of our offerings ascending to God. During the offertory, the gifts, the altar, the minister, and the congregation are sometimes incensed.

In some churches pastors do not encourage the congregation to use missalettes. Why is this?

During the past century there has been a new realization of the Real Presence of Christ in Scrip-

ture. Some pastors feel that the disposable missalettes are not the most dignified way to handle such scriptural material. Others feel that the assembly using missalettes has a tendency to read rather than to absorb the proclaimed Word. If the acoustics, however, in a church are poor or the lecturers inexperienced, most pastors would see a real need for missalettes or other printed material.

How do they determine when Easter comes?

Throughout the liturgical year, the Church celebrates union with Christ. The greatest feast of this year is Easter, which has no fixed date. Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the full moon after the vernal equinox (March 21). Easter can fall between March 22 and April 25. Easter and all the feasts depending on Easter for their reckoning (Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, and Corpus Christi) are known as "movable" feasts.

Why do the celebrants wear different colored robes? What is the significance of the different vestments?

If you were living during the early days of the persecuted Church, you probably would have worn an outer cloak and an undertunic somewhat like today's Mass vestments. This type of clothing is still used at Mass to remind us of those beginnings

of our Church. We are most familiar with the chasuble, the outer colored garment worn over the alb, the long white inner garment. We have also seen the stole, a narrow or wide strip of cloth usually the same color as the chasuble, that is worn by deacons diagonally across the left shoulder and by priests around the neck, with both ends hanging down the front. The colors used in the vestments have different symbolic meanings and are used to demonstrate the messages of the different seasons and feasts of the Church year. The colors used are: white (meaning new life, holiness, resurrection); red (martyrdom, love, kingship); green (eternal hope, spiritual growth); violet or purple (preparation and penance); and black (mourning and death, often replaced by white or purple).

What are the essential elements of the Mass?

If you are concentrating on the Eucharistic aspects of the Mass, here is your answer: The sacrament of the Eucharist needs first an ordained priest. This priest is able to consecrate the bread and wine because his power is an "indelible mark" coming from Christ himself. Second, the Eucharist needs bread made from wheat, and wine made from grapes. Finally, there must be a repeating by the priest of what Jesus said: "This is my body.... This is the cup of my blood." Since ancient

Christian times, these words of consecration have been placed in a thanksgiving prayer such as the Eucharistic prayers with which we are familiar.

If you are concerned with the old legalistic question, "How much of Mass can I miss and still be said to have gone to Mass?" here is your answer. Vatican II has told us that the whole of the Mass is important and that we should attend the entire Mass. The Liturgy of the Word contains Christ and, in fact, Jesus is present throughout the Mass.

Why should we sing during Mass? What is the purpose of times of silence at Mass?

Religious worship of God in song has a long history. The psalms were sung. A Passover feast, such as the one at which Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, probably included joyous singing. Vatican II has urged us that our participation in Mass be external as well as internal. One external response is to sing and, if the choir is singing alone, to unite oneself to what is being sung to help raise one's thoughts to God. Song during Mass unifies the hearts of the attending community. Minds are brought to an understanding of the liturgy, and many find a sung prayer to be even more attractive than a spoken one. Music during Mass is there to serve us and, as we join in singing, our external participation becomes easier and more meaningful.

Our internal worship of God flowers in times of silence. Times of silence have special uses, depending on what has just happened during the Mass. The penitential rite and the invitation to prayer are times to recollect oneself, to recall one's own sins or what it is one is praying for. After the end of a reading or a homily, a time of silence is a time to think about what has been said. Silence after Communion is a time for praise and thanksgiving.

Is the Mass the same all over the world?

Before Vatican II, the ritual, the words and actions of the Mass, was universally the same. Now, however, the ritual of the Mass attempts to reflect the culture of the place in which the Mass is being celebrated. This makes the Mass a more accurate expression of the particular area in which it is celebrated and utilizes better the talents of each individual nation. For instance, the choir and organist in the United States become the choir and harpists in Zaire as traditional *adungu* (harps of five and ten strings) are used in the liturgy. Bishops of individual areas determine which adaptations can bring about the fullest participation in the Mass of the congregations they serve.

What parts of the Mass stay the same? What parts of the Mass change?

Space does not permit going through the Mass section by section. These are, however, the general principles used to determine what parts of the Mass stay the same and what parts of the Mass change. Fixed readings, that is, readings that always stay the same, have been assigned to Sundays, major Church feasts, and the feasts of certain saints. Even on a day with *fixed* readings, options are available. The average Catholic is not always aware of the great diversity of choices that are presented to the planner(s) of each Mass. There are currently four Eucharistic prayers, from which one is usually chosen, and five other options, including three for children. (The Eucharistic prayer always contains the words, "This is my body....This is the cup of my blood.") There are also different options for the penitential rite, such as sprinkling the people with holy water. While options exist, there is always, for instance, a Eucharistic prayer. Even the omitting of certain prayers, such as the Gloria during Lent and Advent, has a liturgical purpose and is intended to be noticed. Still, even though particular readings reflect the congregation's needs on a particular occasion, the Mass structure is constant. The Mass is divided into four sections: the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Concluding Rite.

INTRODUCTORY RITES

Why do we start by confessing sins? Why are the people sprinkled with water at some Masses?

During the Vatican II 1969 reforms, it was decided that what was before a private act by the priest of confessing his sins would now be a public act in which the whole community took part. Sorrow for sin is appropriate at this time, for sin separates us from God, with whom we wish to be unified during the Mass. The sprinkling with water, which may replace the penitential rite, reminds us of how we accepted the Lord at Baptism, turning from sin. Both rites show that we trust God to come to us in mercy and forgiveness, healing us and cleansing us for the mysteries in which we will participate. Each rite also shows our need for continuing conversion, turning and returning to God.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

Who picks the Scripture readings?

Scripture scholars tell us that early Church services were based on what the Jews had experienced in their synagogues. These services had two readings from Scripture, a talk based on these readings

(like our homily), and a prayer. One of the objects of using these readings was to help those attending the synagogue to become more familiar with Scripture. During the Mass you will see people reading from the *Lectionary*, the name given to the book containing the Scripture readings. If you listen closely, in three years you will have reviewed all four gospels and major sections of the Old Testament. The *Lectionary* has a three-year Sunday cycle. For example, the year 1990 brings readings from the A cycle, 1991 from the B cycle, and 1992 the C cycle, and so on. Cycles change beginning with Advent of the previous year. During the week, there is a two-year cycle. Year 1 is for odd years (1991) and Year 2 for even years (1992), and so on. These alternating cycles are not used for Lent and Easter. The same fixed weekday readings are used each year. This is to aid in our day-to-day renewal in this season of spiritual growth. Would you like to follow the Mass readings yourself? Sunday and weekday missals are available at Christian bookstores.

What does the priest say to the deacon before the deacon reads the gospel?

This question shows that the congregation is becoming used to hearing everything that is going on in the Mass. This part of the Mass is supposed to

be spoken in a low voice. The deacon asks for a blessing. The priest says, "The Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may worthily proclaim his gospel. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The deacon answers "Amen."

Is a homily the same as a sermon?

The two words are used interchangeably, but homily is the preferred term. (The word *sermon* does not always have the same meaning as the word *homily*.) As we have learned, homilies existed in the pre-Christian synagogues. A homily is also mentioned in the oldest Mass description that we have. A homily has a specific task: to explain Scripture. Scripture was written in different times and for people with customs sometimes unfamiliar to us. A homily tells us what is happening in Scripture and applies it to us today. It is an extremely important part of the Mass and on Sunday can only be omitted for a serious reason.

What part of the Bible is the Profession of Faith based on?

The Old Testament contains many lists of God's favors to us. These are not always set apart but placed in psalms and other writings. The New Testament also contains lists of what God has done

for us, and these too are frequently not set apart but are part of hymns and other writings. These New Testament “creeds” tell what God has done throughout history and particularly through Jesus. These “creeds” set the model for the Creed used during Mass. A creed had been used during baptismal rites, a simple creed that affirmed basic faith truths. It said, “Yes, I believe in the Father, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in the prophetic Spirit.” Later this simple creed came to be expanded to more accurately reflect the growing knowledge of the content of our faith. The Nicene Creed, used in most Masses and called the Profession of Faith, could be said to have been written in blood, for in the times of the Arian heresy, people literally died for their belief that Christ was divine.

How do they choose what to pray for in the General Intercessions?

In the early Christian Mass, prayers similar to our Prayers of the Faithful were offered, as they had been in the Jewish synagogue service. These prayers were restored when the ritual of the Mass was revised. The exact wording of our General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful) is not specified — it is up to us to provide it. These prayers, however, usually cover the needs of the Church, society, the local parish, those in want, the sick,

and those who have died. Special intentions can also be added to these prayers.

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Why is the tabernacle in another room or section in some churches? What happens to left-over Hosts?

The reserved Hosts, that is, those consecrated but not used in the Mass, are usually placed in a tabernacle. The tabernacle is a place giving honor to God and a place for Eucharistic adoration. It actually has little connection with the altar and needs a place of its own, such as a small room or chapel, where the faithful can go to pray quietly in the presence of the Lord. Today most liturgical experts see a need to separate the tabernacle in some way from the central altar so that both can more clearly serve the function for which they are intended.

Why does the celebrant pour water into the wine?

Some of the actions done during Mass may originally be based on everyday actions done for very practical reasons. For instance, during the time of Jesus, water and wine were usually mixed to make the strong wine drinkable. What we are interested in today, however, is the symbolism of

the gesture. Saint Cyprian, a third-century writer, told us very beautifully that the wine represents Christ and the water represents us — the members of his Church. Christ becomes one with us; his sacrifice becomes ours. The water can also symbolize Christ's own humanity, which he shares with us, and the wine his divinity.

Why does the priest wash his hands during Mass?

During the time of Jesus, it was literally a sin for an Israelite to eat without washing his or her hands. Hands might have been washed before the Last Supper, and the washing of hands might have been assimilated into the sacred meals celebrated after Pentecost. However, we do know for sure that hands were washed at the start of Mass as a symbol of purity of heart as early as the fourth century. In later centuries when gifts were incensed at the offering time, it would be natural to wash hands to remove traces of incense. Hands were also washed to remove any traces of the gifts, gifts not limited to bread and wine and money but including other items destined for use in the Church. The symbolism today is still a washing away of what separates one from God. The priest says softly as he washes his hands, "Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin."

What is the purpose of the sign of peace?

Peace, *shalom*, is such an elaborate concept in Scripture that it is impossible to fully convey it using our word "peace." One altar in Old Testament times contained the words "God Is Peace," and it is just such an actual presence of Jesus that we wish to one another during the sign of peace, a peace only to be totally fulfilled when we are united with the saving Lord forever in heaven. Early Christians followed Jewish tradition by greeting one another lovingly with a kiss, a hug, or a handshake and a wish for *shalom*. We now greet one another during Mass in the same way as we prepare to be united with Jesus, to become as fully as possible one with him in the Eucharist. Our wish of peace expresses our need to be restored, reconciled, and at one with one another so as to be more completely at one with Christ. It is basically a sign of love for one another.

Why is the host made from unleavened bread?

The host was not always made from unleavened bread. In fact during the first nine centuries of the Church, both unleavened and leavened bread were used for the Eucharist. Unleavened bread would have been used at the Last Supper. (At the Exodus Passover, the fleeing Jews did not have time to wait for bread to rise.) Because of this, unleavened

bread has become traditional in the Western Church.

Why is bread broken during Mass? Why is part of the broken bread dropped into the chalice of wine?

During scriptural times bread was an essential of life, and this gift of God was treated with respect. A mark of such respect was to break bread by hand rather than to cut it with a knife. Another name for the meal that became the Mass was "the breaking of the bread," for at each bread was broken and given out. Christ had broken bread at the Last Supper with his friends. This is probably why the custom was retained, but the breaking was also a practical way to distribute the Eucharist. Sharing the pieces of Host came to symbolize that in sharing in the one Bread of Life, Jesus, we who are many are made one together. A particle of the bread is dropped into the wine to signify the union of the body and blood of Jesus.

Is it permissible to receive Communion more than once a day?

A norm is to receive the Lord once a day. (This avoids a previous abuse during which people would "church-hop," going to receive Communion from many churches a day so as to become

“holier.”) Occasions might arise, however, in which you find yourself celebrating at more than one Mass (for example, while attending a funeral, a wedding, a Confirmation, an occasion of special significance). Then, of course, an additional Communion is certainly approved.

Why do we now receive Communion in the hand and from the cup?

At the Last Supper Jesus handed bread and wine to his friends, who took them from him. We are doing what was done then when we receive Communion in the hand and drink from the cup.

I'd like to get more out of Mass. Any suggestions?

Review the Scripture readings before Mass, live out the Mass through works of love, and keep Sunday as a set-apart day of rest. Be upbeat: At every Mass, Jesus himself is there in the priest, in the assembly, and in the Word. If Jesus is really going to be there, and he is, don't you really want to be there too?



Catholics are asked to participate in the Mass each week. As Vatican II states, it “is an action of Christ the priest and of his body which is the Church.”

Just as we must know our own bodies’ needs to maintain physical health, so must we understand Christ’s Body, the Church — including the Mass — to keep our spiritual lives healthy. This pamphlet will help you better understand the Mass by answering some common questions, including:

- **Why were so many changes made in the Mass?**
- **Why are the people sprinkled with water at some Masses?**
- **Who picks the Scripture readings?**
- **Why do we pour water into the wine?**
- **Is the homily the same as a sermon?**

As you better understand the various aspects of the Mass, you’ll find you get much more out of it. Make *Thirty Questions About the Mass* a part of your “spiritual fitness” plan!



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