

Mass



“By the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all.”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1326)

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For Catholics, Mass attendance is a vital part of weekly, if not daily, life. It is the time to gather together in God's presence, to be nourished in a special way by God and by one another. We listen to the words of Scripture, we pray together, and we share the ultimate food for the soul — the Body and Blood of Christ. Furthermore, we do all these things in a prescribed order, using many of the same words and rituals that have been used for nearly two thousand years.

Respect for the Real Presence

Mass etiquette begins with a fundamental respect for the importance and sanctity of the Mass. An attitude of reverence should guide behavior at any religious service, but for Catholics it is especially true. From earliest childhood, Catholics are taught to show the utmost respect and reverence for this sacred and mysterious gift of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The bread and wine do not merely symbolize

Christ; they are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ (CCC, 1413). This central belief sets Catholics apart from most other Christian denominations.



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What does this mean for Catholics and guests at Mass? At a minimum, it asks that the presence and behavior of those present throughout the service not detract in any way from the reverence accorded to the Mass. Our choice of clothing, posture, and participation should all reflect an attitude of dignity and attentiveness.

Entrance protocol

Upon entering a Catholic church, several gestures immediately distinguish Catholic worshipers. Non-Catholics entering a Catholic church need not attempt to imitate these gestures, but may instead simply proceed to a pew and sit.

➤ **Holy water.** At the entrance to each Catholic church, there is a receptacle filled with blessed



water. A carry-over from ancient purification rites, the ritual drop of holy water reminds us that we need to wash away secular things as we enter God's house. More importantly, it also reminds us of our baptismal commitment. Dipping the tips of the fingers

into the water and touching them to our foreheads, we repeat the gesture that first marked us as Christians, the Sign of the Cross.

➤ **Sign of the Cross.** As we enter the church, we dip our fingers into holy water to touch first the forehead, then the center of the chest, and then the shoulders. At the same time, we may say silently, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

What is signified by tracing the Sign of the Cross? This sign confesses faith in both the Holy Trinity and the Redemption wrought by Christ. For most Catholics, the gesture is understood as a way to begin and end prayers.

➤ **Genuflecting.** Before entering the pew, Catholics pause while facing the tabernacle (if visible) and bend the right knee all the way to the floor, then rise up again. This act is called genuflection, from the Latin *genu flexo*, meaning "on bended knee." Like ceremonial washing, genuflection is an ancient mode of courtesy present in many pre-Christian cultures. The early Church embraced this gesture as an appropriate sign of respect for the presence of Jesus Christ in the tabernacle. One who is physically unable to genuflect, may substitute a profound bow at the waist.



➤ **Kneeling.** When Catholics first enter the pew, they kneel and pray silently. Kneeling is seen as a posture of both penance and adoration, and thus is appropriate as we enter God's presence.

The Mass

On a given Sunday the same invocations, responses, sequence of readings, and prayers are recited in Catholic churches throughout the country.

Furthermore, with little additional variation, these same words can be heard in Catholic churches around the world. Why is the Mass so consistent and predictable? The answer is found in the liturgy — the prescribed rites and ceremonies of public worship that are a fundamental part of Catholicism. Whenever or wherever Mass is celebrated, these basic liturgical rituals are encountered:

Introductory Rites

The pre-service meditation and the introductory rites of the Mass serve as a bridge from the everyday atmosphere to the sacred.

➤ **Entrance procession.** At the appointed time, the cantor or another designated person welcomes everyone to Mass and announces the entrance hymn or antiphon. Everyone stands (seen as a posture of respect and praise), and joins in the singing or recitation. The priest(s), altar servers, lectors, and other selected Mass participants process to the altar.

➤ **Opening.** The priest opens the Mass with the words, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” At this time, we make the Sign of the Cross and respond, “Amen,” meaning “So be it,” or “May it be so.” The priest and the congregation then exchange formal greetings.

➤ **Penitential rite.** In this prayer, sinfulness is acknowledged and intercession requested. This is followed by a plea for mercy. The Greek “*Kyrie Eleison*” may be used in place of the English, “Lord have mercy” and/or the Latin penitential prayer, “*Confiteor*,” for the English “I confess to Almighty God . . .”



➤ **Gloria.** The joyful “Gloria” echoes the song of the angels on the first Christmas. The Gloria is recited or sung on Sundays and significant feast days, except during Advent and Lent. The priest then reads the designated opening prayer, which gives the theme of the day’s Mass.

Liturgy of the Word

During the Liturgy of the Word, the assembly hears the Word of God proclaimed and explained.

➤ **Scripture readings.** Lectors read the selected passages from the Old and New Testaments, and a psalm is chanted or sung. Since the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) present the words of Jesus, the Gospel lesson is given added respect. The congregation stands before the Gospel is read, and a priest or deacon reads the portion of the Gospel assigned for the day. At the announcement of



the Gospel reading, the thumb is used to trace a small Sign of the Cross on forehead, mouth, and chest. This indicates a desire that the word of the Lord will be in our minds, upon our lips, and in our hearts.

➤ **Homily.** The congregation is seated to listen to the priest’s homily. The priest usually expounds on the Scripture lessons of the day and links them to our daily lives.

➤ **Creed.** The congregation stands to profess the faith using the words of the Nicene Creed. This creed, first issued by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and completed by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, summarizes basic Catholic beliefs.

➤ **Intercessory prayers.** The final rite of the Liturgy of the Word is the Prayer of the Faithful. Specific and general prayer petitions are offered. The congregation responds to each with, “Lord, hear our prayer,” or a similar response. The priest concludes the prayer and all respond, “Amen.”

Liturgy of the Eucharist

The Mass now moves toward its focal point — the celebration of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Eucharist has its roots in the Jewish family meal, but it is modeled specifically after the Last Supper, where Jesus celebrated the Passover meal, then gave His disciples the instruction to “do this in memory of me.”

➤ **Offertory.** Select members of the congregation, a family or the ushers, bring the bread, wine, and the “offerings” of the congregation (symbolized by the collection) to the priest.

➤ **Eucharistic Prayer.** The congregation stands as the priest begins the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer. This is a short prayer of praise and thanksgiving, after which the congregation joins in singing or reciting the *Sanctus*, “Holy, Holy, Holy....” Then the congregation kneels as the priest recites the Eucharistic Prayer. There are several approved forms of the prayer. Each has a different tone and origin, but all include the words of consecration spoken by Christ at the Last Supper.

➤ **Lord’s Prayer.** Several prayer postures are commonly seen during this part of the liturgy. Some families or couples may join hands, and may reach out to join hands with those next to them. Others extend their hands in a more charismatic posture. Some simply keep their hands folded.



➤ **Sign of Peace.** At the sign of peace, everyone in the congregation turns to others nearby to exchange a handshake, or sometimes a kiss. A common greeting is, “Peace be with you.”

Distribution of Communion

As the priest prepares for the distribution of Communion, the congregation sings or chants the *Agnus Dei*, “Lamb of God.” When the preparations are finished, the priest and his assistants begin to distribute the Holy Eucharist. As the people come forward, a hymn may be sung.

➤ **Who may receive Communion at a Catholic Mass?**

The National Conference of Bishops offers these stipulations for practicing Catholics: "In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (canon 916)."



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Non-Catholics are excluded from taking Communion at a Catholic church. The U.S. Bishops explain the Church's reasoning for this restriction by teaching that reception of the Eucharist by Christians not fully united with us would imply a oneness which does not yet exist, and for which we must all pray. Catholics who invite non-Catholics to Mass have an obligation to clarify this policy with their guests prior to Communion, so that no uncomfortable situations arise suddenly during the reception time. Those who cannot, or for some reason do not care to, receive Communion simply remain in the pew while others go forward.

➤ **How is the sacrament received?**

Those receiving the Eucharist typically are permitted to choose reception of the Host either in the hand or directly on the tongue (after bowing the head in reverence). Given the belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine, it would be seriously offensive to do anything other than put the Host into our mouths the moment we receive. The Blood of Christ might also be offered to communicants from a common chalice. The Catholic Church teaches that Christ is present under either form.

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Concluding Rites

The concluding rites of the liturgy are brief. The congregation stands while the priest offers a short prayer and a blessing. He then reminds us of our mandate: "The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." We respond, "Thanks be to God." A final hymn may be sung, while the priest and participants leave the altar. We go quietly, genuflecting (if the tabernacle is visible) as we leave the pew.

Having been spiritually renewed and nourished through the Mass, we are ready to take Christ out into the world again.

Where to go for more information:

Catholic Etiquette: What You Need to Know

About Catholic Rites and Wrongs by Kay Lynn Isca

Celebrating the Mass: A Guide for Understanding

and Loving the Mass More Deeply by Alfred

McBride, O.Praem.

The Holy Eucharist Prayer Book by Alfred McBride,

O.Praem.

A Pocket Guide to the Mass by Michael Dubruiel

The How-To Book of the Mass by Michael Dubruiel

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By Kay Lynn Isca

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