

### THE MASS

Background note prepared by Sister Virginia  
preparatory to attendance at Mass at St.  
Mary's.

The mass is the central act of worship, or liturgy, in the Catholic Church. It has a continuity going back to Old Testament times, when the Jews (as they still do today), celebrated the Passover feast each year to commemorate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This commemoration took the form of a ritual meal during which the greatest event in the history of the Jewish people - the "passing over" from slavery to the Promised Land - was, in a certain sense, re-lived. - The Jews do not merely "remember" the Exodus, but each generation experiences it through the celebration of the Passover.

It was at such a Passover meal that Jesus Christ, on the night before he died, transformed the meaning of this feast and celebration for all who believe in him. The new Passover was to be his own "passing over" from death to life - a sacrificial and redemptive act which would free all men from slavery to sin and bring them to eternal life in union with Christ. Knowing that he would offer his life - body and blood - as a redemptive sacrifice on the following day, Jesus took the unleavened bread of the Passover meal, broke it, and gave it to his friends, saying, "Take this, all of you, and eat it; this is my body which will be given up for you." Then he took the cup of wine, saying, "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all men so that sins will be forgiven. Do this in memory of me."

The Lord's Last Supper was the first Mass. In every Mass since then these words and actions have been repeated. To the Catholic, separations of time and space collapse at this moment: we do not merely commemorate the events of Christ's Passover - his Last Supper, his death on the cross, his rising from the dead - we participate in them. It is Christ who speaks through the priest, saying, "This is my body...This is my blood" and at this moment, Christ becomes present under the signs of bread and wine. It is Christ alone who can offer a worthy sacrifice - Himself - to God our Father, and through the Mass we share in his one perfect offering. We are united with Christ himself in receiving Communion (also called the Holy Eucharist). In the Mass, all who ever did, or ever will, participate in this sacred liturgy, are one in Christ.

The basic structure of the Mass (see below) is the same throughout the world. Language, the type of music and gestures used vary according to the community participating. There are daily variations in the scriptural readings and some of the prayers used at Mass. There is a yearly cycle of feast days - the greatest being the celebration of Holy Week and Easter, i.e. the events of Christ's suffering, death and Resurrection. Other feasts emphasize different aspects of the mystery of Christ or events in his life (e.g. Christmas - his birthday) or honour Mary his mother or other Saints.

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September 15 is the feast of the Virgin Mother of Sorrows. Catholics honour Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the greatest woman who ever lived, not only because she was chosen to become the Mother of the God-man, but because she was the "first of the redeemed," the perfect follower of Jesus Christ, the first Christian: faithful to him even in the darkest moments of his life and death, offering her own sufferings with his for the salvation of the world. It is this latter aspect which is commemorated in today's feast. Other feasts of Our Lady celebrate the joys and glories of her life - this one recalls her fidelity despite suffering and presents her as a model for all Christians.



## STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

Introductory Rites - prayers of repentance for sin and asking for pardon

Gloria - hymn of praise (sung or recited) - on Sundays and feastdays

### THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Readings from the Old Testament and/or the letters of St Paul and the Apostles

Responsory Psalm

Reading from one of the four Gospels

Homily (brief sermon by the priest)

The Profession of Faith (Creed) - sung or recited by all on Sundays and special feastdays

The Prayer of the Faithful - prayers for the needs of the Church and the world; often composed by members of the congregation

### THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Offertory - the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar and offered to God by the Priest on behalf of all

The Eucharist Prayer - contains the words of Consecration through which the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. These are the words Christ spoke at the first Mass on the night before He died: (over the bread): "Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you." (over the wine): "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all men so that sins will be forgiven. Do this in memory of me."

#### The Communion Rite

The Lord's Prayer (Our Father)

The Sign of Peace (people greet each other as a sign of brotherhood in Christ, usually saying "The peace of Christ be with you.")

Communion - people come forward to receive Jesus under the form of bread (at some Masses, also under the form of wine).

Concluding Rite - priest blesses the people.

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## LITURGICAL SYMBOLS

(adapted from the Layman's Daily Missal, Helicon Press, Baltimore, 1961.)

The altar is the focal point at the celebration of Mass. The space in which it stands is called the "sanctuary," or "holy place." The altar is the place of sacrifice. It is also the table around which the People of God gather to share in His Banquet.

Candles - symbol of Christ, "the Light of the World." Also a symbol of faith (lighted candles are held during solemn professions of faith: at baptism, renewal of baptismal promises during the Easter celebration, religious professions, ordination, at point of death).



vestments - garments worn by the priest saying Mass was the ordinary civilian dress of citizens of the Roman Empire during the first few centuries of the Christian era. The colour of the outer vestment, the chasuble, varies according to the feast or season of the year.

liturgical colours: white: for Easter and Christmas seasons, for feasts of the Blessed Trinity, Christ, Mary, Angels, and saints who are not martyrs.

red: for the week of Pentecost, feasts of the Cross and of martyrs.

purple: for Advent, Lent, and other penitential occasions

green: used on ordinary days during the time after Pentecost until Advent.

black: for the liturgy of the dead.

tabernacle - an ornamental box, usually attached to the wall within the sanctuary, or in large churches, at a side altar, where the Holy Eucharist (in the form of consecrated Hosts) is reserved. Catholics pray before the tabernacle to Jesus present in the Eucharist. They genuflect as a sign of homage to Christ when they approach or leave the area in front of the tabernacle. The Eucharist may be taken from the tabernacle by the priest to be distributed to the sick or dying at times outside of Mass.