

Catholic

UPDATE

© 2017 LIGUORI
PUBLICATIONS,
A REDEMPTORIST
MINISTRY.

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
63057-9999

800-325-9521
LIGUORI.ORG

PHOTOCOPYING
PROHIBITED.

C1701A

JANUARY 2017



Getting More Out of Mass

BY EDWARD SRI, PHD

Do you ever feel you're just going through the motions at Mass? You stand up, sit down, and kneel. You say, "and with your spirit," "amen," and "thanks be to God." You go with the flow in the liturgy, but your mind is somewhere else and you question whether you have a full understanding of the meaning behind the motions.

If we look at the Mass from a biblical perspective, however, things can get very exciting. We'll begin to see that the Mass is not a collection of random prayers, signs, and rituals. Rather, each part is charged with profound meaning. Whether it's making the sign of the cross, or using incense and candles, or praying "Alleluia," "Glory to God in the Highest..." "Lamb of God..." practically everything we say and do in the liturgy is rooted in Scripture. The more we understand the biblical meaning

of these rites, the more we will experience the Mass as a personal encounter with God who, throughout the liturgy, is inviting us to a closer relationship with him.

THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

The opening part of the Mass is all about getting ready. We are preparing our hearts and minds to encounter God in the most powerful way possible on earth. In the first half of Mass, God speaks to us through his inspired Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word. Then, in the second half of Mass, we actually receive Jesus in holy Communion—his very Body and Blood—in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This, indeed, is a lot to get ready for!

But we can't simply walk into a church, go through the motions at Mass, and think the liturgy will somehow magically inspire us, change our lives, and make us feel

closer to God. We need to do our part. God is present in the liturgy. But we need to ask ourselves: Are we present to God? The opening prayers of the Mass help us transition into this sacred space so that we enter more fully into it.

Sign of the Cross

First, we trace the sign of the cross over our bodies and say, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In the Bible, to call on God’s name is to invoke God’s presence in worship. The “people began to invoke the LORD by name” (Genesis 4:26). So did Abraham, Isaac, and King David (Genesis 12:8 and 26:25; Psalm 124:8). Jesus himself taught, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Standing in this ancient biblical tradition, we, too, call on God’s name at the beginning of every Mass. And we do this to invite God into our lives in a special way at that moment. We are setting aside that time for God and calling on his holy presence to be with us as we prepare to encounter him in the liturgy.

The Lord Be With You

Next, the priest says, “The Lord be with you.” This is more than a simple salutation, like “good morning.” In the Bible, this expression is used to address people, called together by God, to tend to an important mission—one that couldn’t be accomplished without help. Consider Moses at the burning bush, or Joshua when he was called to lead the people into the Promised Land, or Gideon when he was called to rescue the people from their oppressors. Many Old Testament heroes heard these words when God called them to their sacred task. Mary also heard these words when Gabriel announced that she would be the mother of the messiah. In each case, the person involved desperately needed God’s help to carry out the mission, and that’s why God or his messenger, an angel, says to the person, “The Lord be with you.”

But what does it mean for *us* to hear those words at Mass? “The Lord be with you” reminds us of the daunting mission God entrusts to us in the liturgy: to encounter his word in the Scriptures and his presence

DIG DEEPER

God is present in the liturgy, but in preparation for the Mass, we need to ask ourselves: Are we fully present to him?

How can we prepare for Mass to get the most of the Liturgy of the Word?

How can we better fulfill the crucial mission entrusted to us each time we are dismissed from Mass?

in the Eucharist. This is not something to take for granted. As sinners, we aren’t worthy to encounter God in this intimate way. But God invites us despite our faults and he will help us prepare our souls to enter into these sacred mysteries. So when the priest says, “The Lord is with you,” it’s as if he is saying to us, “Get ready! May God be with you as you prepare for this most sacred encounter with him in the Mass.”

I Confess...Lord Have Mercy

One of the most important steps in the Introductory Rites is to confess our sins and beg for God’s forgiveness. That’s why we pray, “I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters...” and then we entrust ourselves to his loving mercy, praying, “Lord have mercy...Christ have mercy... Lord have mercy.”

These prayers recall a twofold theme in the Bible: confession and mercy. God is always reaching out to his people with merciful love, no matter how far away they may have turned from him. All we need to do is humbly admit our faults—to confess our sins—and turn back to him. That’s what these two prayers bring together: our heartfelt contrition and God’s loving mercy.

Glory to God in the Highest

Finally, we give praise to God for the forgiveness of sins brought about by Christ as we pray, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” These opening words of the Gloria recall the hymn of praise sung by the angels over Bethlehem on that first Christmas night. So the Gloria is like a Christmas song we sing all throughout the year.

And fittingly so. For every Mass, is in a sense, a reliving of the Christmas mystery. The same Jesus who was welcomed in Bethlehem by the angels some 2,000 years ago is about to come upon our altar sacramentally under the appearance of bread and wine. How wonderful it is to welcome him with the same song of the angels: “Glory to God in the highest!”

LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Liturgy of the Word is the best Bible study on earth. Here, God speaks to each of us personally through the

inspired words of Scripture. The Bible doesn't just talk *about* God. It is *God's own words* spoken in the words of men and women. And since they are God's words, they transcend time and space and can speak to us today. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the words of Scripture thousands of years ago is still alive in our hearts today, prompting us and guiding us to apply them to our lives. They are, therefore, personal words spoken anew to the heart of each individual at Mass.

That's why three people may hear the same reading but each be touched by God in a different way. One might hear something that sheds light on a challenge he or she is facing, while another person might be inspired to grow in a certain virtue, and still another may find comfort in a time of suffering. As Vatican II taught, "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [*Dei Verbum*], 21).

Just as the ancient Jews seem to have had a three-year cycle of readings in the synagogue, we also have a three-year cycle of readings that present the wide breadth of sacred Scripture. In the Liturgy of the Word, we hear from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament, and the Gospels week after week. By simply going to Mass each Sunday, Catholics journey over and over again through salvation history.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the high point of the Mass. It begins with the Presentation of the Gifts.

In the Bible, bread was the most basic type of food, seen as necessary to sustain life (Sirach 29:21; 39:26). Yet, the Israelites regularly offered up some of their bread in certain ritual sacrifices (Exodus 29:2; Leviticus 2:4–7; 7:13) and feasts (Leviticus 23:15–20). To give up one's bread would have been a personal sacrifice, expressing the individual's giving of himself to God.

Wine was one of the first fruits presented to the temple (Nehemiah 10:36–39), and it was poured out as a drink offering (a libation) in Israel's thanksgiving and expiatory sacrifices (Exodus 29:38–41; Numbers 15:2–15). Since the

sacrificial gifts and the individual giver were closely associated together, the offering of bread and wine in the Bible symbolized the offering of one's very self.

So don't think of this part of the Mass as "half-time"—a moment to tune out for a bit. When the gift bearers process to the altar with the bread and wine, we should be talking to God in our hearts, uniting all our works, joys, and sufferings—our entire lives—with Christ's offering of himself to the Father, which is about to be made sacramentally present.

Lift Up Your Hearts

Next, the priest exhorts us, "Lift up your hearts." In the Bible, the heart is the center of all our thoughts, desires, and attentions. The priest saying "Lift up your hearts," therefore, is like a trumpet blast, waking us up. It summons us to give God our fullest attention right now, to lift up all our thoughts and desires to God.

Too often our minds are somewhere else—thinking about work, the football game later that afternoon, the doughnuts after Mass. It's hard to remain focused throughout the entire liturgy. But if there's ever a part for which we should try to give our best, it's now in the eucharistic prayer as we enter the supreme mysteries of the Mass. Lift up your hearts!

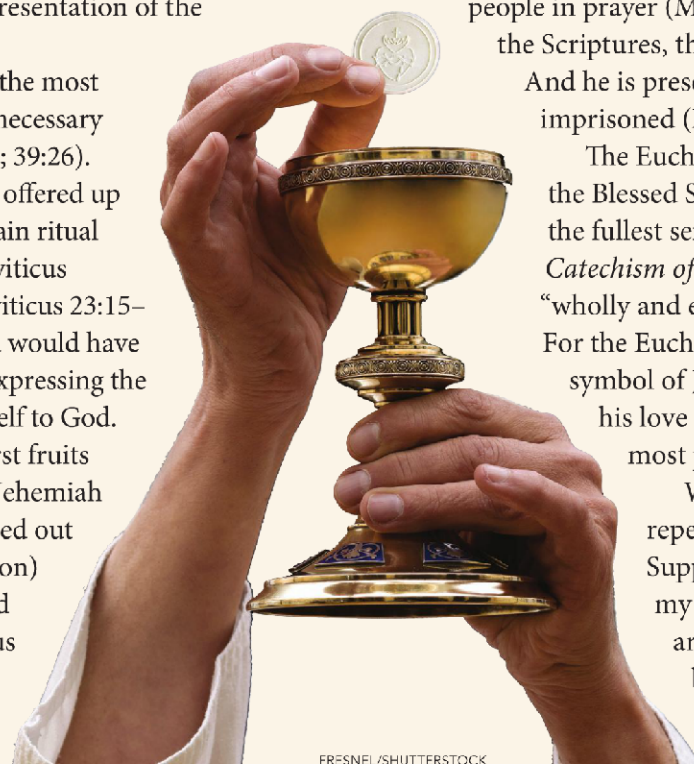
Words of Consecration

The words of consecration remind us that Jesus' presence in the Eucharist is different from other ways he is close to us. Jesus said he would be present to his people in prayer (Matthew 18:20). He is present in the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the priest. And he is present in the poor, sick, and imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–46).

The Eucharist, however, is unique. In the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus is present in the fullest sense, making himself, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses, "wholly and entirely present" (CCC 1374). For the Eucharist is more than a mere symbol of Jesus or a sacred reminder of his love for us. The Eucharist, in the most profound sense, *is* Jesus.

When the priest at Mass repeats what Jesus said at the Last Supper—"This is my body... This is my blood"—the bread and wine are really changed into Christ's body, blood, soul, and divinity.

The Eucharist still looks,



tastes, and feels like bread and wine, but underneath those outward appearances, Christ's Body and Blood are really present (CCC 1376). As St. Cyril of Jerusalem expressed, "Do not see in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said they are his body and his blood: faith assures you of this, though your senses suggest otherwise." Our God loves us so much he comes to us upon our altars, under the appearance of bread and wine. And he longs to be united to us most intimately in holy Communion.

Lord I Am Not Worthy...

But before we experience that supreme union with God, we repeat the words of the Roman centurion in the Gospels who wanted Jesus to heal his dying servant. On one hand, the centurion didn't feel worthy to have Jesus come to his home to perform the healing. The centurion acknowledged his own sinfulness, saying, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof" (Matthew 8:8; see Luke 7:6-7). At the same time, the centurion placed all his trust in Jesus, believing that Jesus would perform the miracle and heal his servant. He said to Jesus, "Only say the word and my servant will be healed."

The Roman centurion models the two dispositions we should have when we approach holy Communion at Mass.

We should come with utter humility, acknowledging we're not worthy to have Jesus come under the "roof" of our souls. But we should also come with confidence, entrusting ourselves to Christ's mercy. We should believe that, just as Jesus healed the centurion's servant some 2,000 years ago, he can heal us of whatever wounds, weaknesses, or fears afflict us as he comes to dwell within us in the Eucharist today.

CONCLUDING RITES

The only time the word *Mass* is used in the sacred liturgy is at the end: "Go forth, the Mass is ended."

"Mass" comes from the Latin word *missa*, which means "dismissal" or "sending." It was customary in the ancient world to conclude an assembly with a formal dismissal, and the early Christians did the same, with the priest ending the liturgy with the words "*Ite, missa est*"—literally, "Go, you are dismissed."

The Church eventually named the entire liturgy after this key word in the conclusion: *missa*. This expresses how the liturgy is a sending, a going forth. The closing prayer, however, is not a directionless dismissal. It sends us on a crucial mission: Having encountered Jesus in the Eucharist, we are now sent to bring his love into the world.

DR. EDWARD SRI is a theologian, author, and internationally known Catholic speaker. He has written several Catholic best-selling books, including *A Biblical Walk Through the Mass* (Ascension Press) and *Walking With Mary* (Image).

He is professor of theology at the Augustine Institute and a founding leader with Curtis Martin of FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students). His faith-formation programs have been used in thousands of parishes around the world.

Dr. Sri also leads pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land. He resides with his wife, Elizabeth, and their eight children in Littleton, CO. Follow him on Facebook and at edwardsri.com



Please share or recycle this *Catholic Update*.



KEEP THE FAITH

Subscribe to *Catholic Update* today at Subscriptions.Liguori.org to receive one or more copies of each issue.

Copies of more than 250 past issues of *Catholic Update* are available, with discounts provided for larger purchases. See the complete list at Liguori.org/Catholic-Update.



IMPRIMATUR: REV. MSGR. MARK S. RIVITUSO, VICAR GENERAL, ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS, NOVEMBER 11, 2016.

Permission to publish is an indication that nothing contrary to Church teaching is contained in this work.

It does not imply any endorsement of the opinions expressed in the publication; nor is any liability assumed by this permission.

Scripture texts in this work are from *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC