

4. Basic Structure of the Mass

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The basic structure of the Mass can be traced back to the second century when Justin Martyr, an early Church Father, described in detail the Eucharistic celebrations of the young Christian community around 150 AD. He described the Eucharist in this way:

The records of the apostles or writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. Then, when the reader has finished, the president in a discourse admonishes [us] to imitate these good things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers; and as we said before, when we have finished praying, bread and wine and water are brought up, and the president likewise offers prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution, and everyone participates in [the elements] over which thanks have been given; and they are sent through the deacons to those who are not present.⁵²

From very early on, Christians gathered on the Lord's Day to hear the Word of God, to listen to the presider preach, to offer prayers of intercession, to pray the prayer of thanksgiving (the Eucharistic Prayer), to sing the great Amen, to participate in the Eucharistic meal by eating and drinking of the Body and Blood of Christ, and finally, to go forth to care for the needs of others. The *ordo* or order of Mass was clearly established by the second century, and has remained intact over the past two thousand years, with varying degrees of ritual ceremony that have accompanied it.

The structure of the Mass has a rhythm that includes primary and secondary elements. Generally speaking, secondary rites are usually preparatory for the primary rites. For example, the introductory rites, which include the entrance hymn, the greeting, the penitential act or sprinkling rite, the Gloria, and the collect, function to gather and prepare the assembly to hear God's word. The purpose of the introductory rites "is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily."⁵³

The two primary rites that form the basis of the entire Eucharist are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states:

The two parts that, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.⁵⁴

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council made it clear that Scripture was to have a much greater place of prominence in the liturgy than in recent centuries, a place it had occupied in the earliest tradition. Furthermore, the Council Fathers desired that Catholics develop a deep appreciation for the Word of God, that the Word of God be central to the lives of the faithful:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the reform, progress, and adaptation of the liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites gives testimony.⁵⁵

Therefore, the Liturgy of the Word was recovered as a primary element of the entire Eucharistic celebration. The Liturgy of the Word includes: the First Reading which is either taken from the Old Testament or from the Acts of the Apostles, and on occasion from Revelation; the Responsorial Psalm which is preferably sung at the ambo; the Second Reading which is taken from the New Testament and is primarily from the letters of the Apostles; the Gospel Acclamation; the Gospel reading, the homily, the Creed, and the General Intercessions or Universal Prayer.

After the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins. We can begin to see here what scholars have identified as the four-fold shape of the Eucharist: take, bless, break, and eat. The preparation of the gifts, another secondary rite, begins the liturgy of the Eucharist and prepares the assembly to enter into the great prayer of thanksgiving. The preparation of the gifts is a simple rite which includes: preparing the altar, bringing forth gifts of bread and wine and gifts for the poor, preparing the gifts of bread and wine to be offered, and finally praying over the gifts.

Once the gifts have been prepared, we enter into “the center and summit of the entire celebration”, the Eucharistic prayer. The Eucharistic prayer is the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification in which the priest, in union with the entire congregation, offers the prayer to the Father through Jesus Christ. In this prayer, the Church, united with Christ, gives thanks and praise to God for all God has done in our lives. Also, the Church offers the sacrifice of bread and wine, asking that they may be made holy, that they become the Body and Blood of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only do we ask that bread and wine be changed, but that the power of the Holy Spirit also change us that we might be a more perfect sacrifice to the Father. Having prayed this great prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification, in and through Christ, the people make their assent by singing the great Amen. The next significant element of the Liturgy of the Eucharist is the Communion Rite.

While the heart of the celebration of the Eucharist is the Eucharistic Prayer, the consummation of the Mass is found in Holy Communion, whereby the people purchased for the Father by his beloved Son eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ. They are thereby joined together as members of Christ’s mystical Body, sharing the one life of the Spirit. In the great sacrament of the altar, they are joined to Christ Jesus and to one another.⁵⁶

The Communion Rite is composed of certain elements that prepare us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ so that our act of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ becomes a clear sign of our unity with Christ and one another. The Lord’s Prayer, the Sign of Peace, and the Fraction Rite or breaking of the bread, are all preparatory for the reception of Holy Communion. These elements help us to become one, to recognize our need to forgive others, to recognize our need to be reconciled to one another, to recognize our unity, even though we are many members. Thus, through these elements of the Communion Rite, our hearts and minds are readied to receive the Lord, to be in union with Christ and each other.

As we eat and drink of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we make our Amen, we say, “Yes, I believe.” We believe that while the Eucharistic elements appear to be bread and wine, they really and truly are Christ present under the form of bread and wine. We also believe that by eating and drinking of his Body and Blood, we become what we eat, as St. Augustine pointed out in a fifth century homily to catechumens: “The Bread is the Body of Christ, the cup is the Blood of Christ and also You are the body of Christ. You reply ‘amen’ to that which you are, the Body of Christ.”⁵⁷ We are nourished and strengthened by the very Body and Blood of Christ to be his Body in the world.

Nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church is sent forth to feed a hungry world. We are dismissed with the words, “Ite, missa est. Go, you are sent.” As Saint John Paul II reminds us, the Eucharist is not simply for our personal edification, but is “a charge given to Christians, inviting them to work for the spread of the Gospel and the imbuing of society with Christian values.” We are sent forth to participate in bringing about the reign of God here on earth.