

# Entrance rites: Getting ready to meet God

The following is the second part in a seven-part series on the Mass.

Last week I mentioned a few concepts that help us appreciate the Mass, such as symbolic objects, words and actions, timelessness, active participation and changed lives. Now let's look more closely at the beginning of Mass.

Of course, we don't think that in the Upper Room one of the apostles fired up an organ, Jesus put on a stole and chasuble, got in line behind the altar servers carrying incense and candles, and they sang "Gather Us In" before beginning the Last Supper.

Around the year A.D. 155, St. Justin explained to a pagan emperor how Christians did it: "On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read . . ." (See "Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1345).

The rest of St. Justin's liturgy looks remarkably familiar, and it is reassuring that the early church celebrated Mass pretty much the same way we still do. But notice that St. Justin says nothing about the entrance rites. These developed gradually over several hundred years.

- **Altar.** One of the earliest things to develop is the symbolism of the altar itself. At the start of Mass, when everyone reaches the sanctuary, we bow to the altar, even if the tabernacle is in a different chapel. And bishops, priests and deacons kiss the altar. Why?

That's because according to St. Ambrose (late 300s) the altar is a symbol of Christ. The liturgy calls Jesus Christ priest, victim and altar: As High Priest, he makes the offering (Hebrews 5:1-10). As Victim, he is the one being sacrificed, the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 13:8).

But why altar? St. Paul says we "offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and

pleasing to God, our spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). Since we know the Father accepts Christ’s sacrifice, we place our lives on Christ himself; he is the one through whom we sacrifice our lives. Reverencing the altar is reverencing Christ himself.

- **Greeting.** The celebrant greets the assembly with the Sign of the Cross and a scriptural text such as, “The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Titus 1:4).

This is much richer than merely saying, “Good morning.” No matter how much the priest and people like one another, something more is happening: The priest is wishing God upon the people, and the people respond not just to the man, but to Jesus Christ himself.

That’s why the literal translation of the people’s response is, “And with your spirit.” Christ greets his bride (the church), and the bride greets the spirit of Christ present in the priest.

- **Penitential rite.** Are you ready to meet Jesus, who really comes to us in the Eucharist? Sometimes, neither am I. That’s why we usually ask for mercy next. This can take several forms: The most ancient predates even the use of Latin in Mass: We cry out “Kyrie eleison,” Greek for “Lord have mercy.”

The Confiteor (“I confess . . .”) first shows up around the eighth century. And sometimes, such as at Easter and Masses with baptism, we renew our baptismal promises and replace the penitential rite with a sprinkling with water.

The Gloria comes from the song the angels sang at Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:4) and originally was used only during the Christmas season. It found its way into Mass during the sixth century. Christ is born anew in each Mass we celebrate, and we sing his praises with the angels and saints who are continually praising him. Each time we pray Mass, we join with the liturgy already going on in heaven (CCC, 1090).

- **Opening prayer.** The opening prayer is also called the “collect.” The priest intones, “Let us pray,” and then a brief silence follows. The silence is not just waiting for the server to bring the book; each of us is supposed to be praying silently during that time, and after a short while the priest “collects” all those silent prayers

into the opening prayer. When the priest ends, we all acclaim “Amen!” signaling our agreement with the prayer, and we are ready for God to speak to us.

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