

Helpful Ideas for a More Meaningful Celebration of the Mass

For Catholics the celebration of Mass is the primary way we fulfill the commandment to “Keep holy the Lord’s Day.” However, regular participation at Mass should be more than just keeping a commandment out of fear and guilt. It helps to understand the Mass as an opportunity to be fed on a weekly basis by God’s Word from Scripture and the sharing in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Not doing so we become spiritually “dehydrated” and distance our relationship with God and fellow members of the Church.

Try to arrive on time for Mass so you can participate in the Mass to the fullest. Sometimes this is not always possible especially if one has young children or one’s health is compromised. Being a couple of minutes late is no problem. But if you find yourself missing most or all of the Scripture Readings of the Mass on a regular basis perhaps it’s time to consider going to a latter Mass.

Remember Catholics are obligated to refrain from eating and drinking one hour prior to the reception of Holy Communion (and not one hour prior to the start of Mass). Water and medicine may be taken any time prior to Communion. To help prevent feeling light headed or sick during Mass due to a lack of food please eat something to hold you over until after Mass when you can eat something more substantial.

If you are sick with the flu, flu-like symptoms, or a severe cold, stay home! It is not a sin to miss Mass because one is sick, severe weather prevents you getting to church, or you need to be a caregiver for someone who is ill. If you have a chronic illness that prevents you from celebrating Mass on a regular basis please remember the Catholic Mass is available several times per day on TV. Check your local listings for channels and times.

When you arrive in church prior to Mass it is customary to use holy water to mark our body with the sign of the cross (as a reminder of baptism), genuflect before entering a pew (showing reverence the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle) and to spend some time in private prayer. If time permits open the missalette to the day’s Scripture Readings and read them in preparation for their proclamation during Mass.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the “Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations, which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #14). The Code of Canon Law in #1247 states, “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass.” This means everyone, and not just the priest, is called to celebrate the Mass. We do so with our mere presence but more importantly with our participation in the spoken and sung words, physical gestures, watching and listening and our reception of the Eucharist. If we understand the Mass as a prayer, actually the most supreme prayer of the Church, we are called to enter into that prayer by our active participation. One should never substitute praying the Mass by saying other forms of prayer during Mass such as the rosary, devotions, private prayers, etc.

The Introductory Rite of the Mass begins with the Entrance Procession, which is not only a functional act but also a visual expression of the people becoming a liturgical community, and its accompanying hymn opens the celebration and fosters unity of those gathered. This is followed by the Act of Penance which is an acknowledgment that as a sinful people we are dependent upon God’s love and mercy. When saying the “I confess to almighty God....” we strike our breast one time at the words, “...through my fault...through my most grievous fault....” Since this is not a sacramental forgiveness of sins it is not necessary to make the sign of the cross when the priest says, “May almighty God have mercy on us....” The Introductory Rite concludes with the priest saying “The Collect” (Opening Prayer) on behalf of all the assembled. In essence he “collects” their prayers and offers them up to God.

The first major part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word when we are called to be attentive to the proclamation of God’s Word from Scripture. Ideally we should listen to the Word of God being proclaimed rather than following the Readings in a missalette or missal. The Responsorial Psalm is not just a response to the First Reading but a meditative prayer helping us to savor the Word of God. Out of reverence for the Gospel, we stand and prior to its proclamation everyone makes three small crosses with the thumb on the forehead, mouth, and chest. The Gospel is

followed by the homily given by the priest or deacon basing his reflection on the Scripture Readings showing how God is continuing to act and speak among God's people today. After the homily is the Profession of Faith, during which all make a profound bow (bending the body at the waist), at the words, "...and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man." The Liturgy of the Word concludes with offering of prayers of petition, formally known as the Universal Prayers but commonly known as the Prayer of the Faithful or General Intercessions. After the general prayers are spoken we have the opportunity to offer in silence our personal needs and petitions.

The second major part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This begins with the Presentation and Preparation of the Gifts and Altar (formerly known as the Offertory). The altar is prepared with the necessary vessels to be used for Communion and gifts of bread and wine are carried by the faithful to express their participation in the Eucharist. One major element of this part of the Mass is the Eucharistic Prayer said on behalf of the people by the priest. If one is not physically capable of kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer then he/she should be seated. The Catholic Church has thirteen forms of the Eucharistic Prayer. Since only six of the thirteen are printed in our missalettes, it's a good practice to watch and listen to the words of the Prayer rather than trying to follow along in the missalette. During the Prayer the priest says the words of consecration when the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into the real presence of Jesus' Body and Blood. When the priest raises the host and chalice everyone is supposed to look at them, which is the reason why the priest raises them so they can be clearly seen. The custom of bowing the head originated in a time of exaggerated personal piety and is no longer recommended.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist continues with the Communion Rite. This begins with the recitation (or singing) of the Lord's Prayer. Some people like to hold hands with the people beside them, but there is no requirement that one has to do so. Others prefer to fold their hands or to extend their hands with the palms facing upward. This is followed by the sharing of the Sign of Peace. Though it is customary to shake hands with those around you again this is not a required gesture. Family members and friends may prefer to embrace or even kiss one another. The important thing is offer the words "Peace be with you" to those nearby. Another major element of this part of the Mass is the reception of Holy Communion. When walking in procession waiting our turn to receive the Eucharist it is recommended that we take with us a missalette so we can join in the singing of the Communion hymn. Just prior to receiving the Eucharist we are to make a simple bow of the head (like a nod) as a sign of reverence. We should not genuflect since this can cause the person behind us to trip and fall. When the minister says "Body/Blood of Christ" we are to respond "Amen." There are two ways to receive the consecrated Bread: in the palm of the hand or on the tongue. To receive the consecrated Wine simply take a sip from the chalice. After receiving Communion please return to your pew and continue in the singing of the Communion hymn rather than saying private prayers. Though the reception of Holy Communion is a personal encounter with Christ it is not a private encounter but one that is done within a community. This is why we sing a Communion hymn so it is an outward expression of the unity we share in the Eucharist. Also, after receiving Communion please don't leave the church and skip the rest of the Mass (unless one has a serious reason to do so). Leaving the church at this time destroys the unity we are celebrating and is sacrilegious to the Eucharist. Once the tabernacle door is closed everyone should be seated (rather than waiting for the priest to be seated) and use the quiet time for private prayers. The Communion Rite ends with the priest saying the Prayer After Communion.

The final part of the Mass is called the Concluding Rites. These begin with the reading of the Announcements which should be brief, necessary, and generally of concern to the whole community. After a greeting the priest extends a blessing praying that the greatest of all benefits may be given in abundant measure to those who have shared in God's Word and Christ's Body and Blood. After the dismissal by the deacon or priest it is customary in most churches to sing a recessional hymn to express praise or to reflect a particular liturgical day or season. Out of courtesy please remain in the church until the priest and other ministers reach the back of the church. Ideally everyone should remain in church until the singing of the recessional hymn is finished.