

THE MASS IS NEVER ENDED

After the blessing, the deacon or the priest
dismisses the people with the words:
Ite, missa est (Go, you are sent forth).

These words help us to grasp the relationship
between the Mass just celebrated
and the mission of Christians in the World....

The People of God might be helped
to understand more clearly
this essential dimension of the Church's life,
taking the dismissal as a starting point.

Pope Benedict XVI, *The Sacrament of Charity*, 51

THE MASS IS NEVER ENDED

Rediscovering
Our Mission to
Transform the World

GREGORY F. AUGUSTINE PIERCE



THE MASS IS NEVER ENDED (revised edition)
Rediscovering Our Mission to Transform the World
Gregory F. Augustine Pierce

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Foreword

by Paul Canavese, director,
The Pastoral Center



Do any of these statements sound familiar—in your family or parish or with young-adults?

- “I just don’t find Mass relevant to my daily life.”
- “I’m spiritual but not religious.”
- “Mass is boring.”



This book is the perfect place to start to address the above statements. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has called for a National Eucharistic Revival to help us all reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist and the Mass and why they are so important to us. And, as Greg Pierce quickly makes clear, our Eucharistic liturgy is *all about* our daily lives. It prepares, supports, sustains, and sends each of us to carry on the mission

that Jesus gave his disciples, his mission to help make the world more as God intended it to be—whether it be in our homes, in a classroom, in the workplace, among our friends and neighbors, or halfway across the world. This mission, which Jesus named the “Kingdom” or “Reign” of God, is not exclusively or even primarily a job for vowed religious, priests, bishops, or popes; it is for all of us lay-people who spend most our time living and working outside the walls of local churches.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI suggested that the best way to understand the Mass may be through the lens of the official Dismissal from Mass. In a way, the pope implied, our celebration of the Eucharist exists to prepare us for the mission of all Christians. So we gather as a community each week (or more often) to recharge, refocus, and refuel. We remember together how Jesus served others in self-giving love and told us to do the same. If this is boring, if this is not spiritual, if this is not relevant, then we must be doing something very wrong.



After Pope Benedict’s resignation, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, SJ, of Argentina gave a challenging, prophetic, four-minute speech on a similar theme that set him on the path to becoming Pope Francis.

Gathering with the other cardinals who would soon elect him pope, Cardinal Bergoglio emphasized that

the Church exists to “come out of itself,” to go out to the margins of society and spread the Good News. He recalled Revelation 3:20, in which “Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently, the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter.... But at times, I think that Jesus may be knocking from the inside, that we may let him out.” An unhealthy Church, the future Pope Francis continued, has us try to keep Jesus inside, just for ourselves, rather than, as Saint Theresa of Avila taught us to pray, to become Christ’s “eyes, ears, hands, and feet” in the world.

The Catholic Church teaches that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. And, as they say, “We are what we eat.” So after Communion, as we exit into the parking lot and re-enter the world after each Mass, we bring Jesus within us, giving us strength, wisdom, and perhaps an occasional kick in the pants to do the right thing (even when it’s hard). Fortunately, the door will be open again for us next week, after we renew our commitment to the mission, so we can be sent forth again at the end of that Mass.

As Greg Pierce puts it, Catholics do not *go* to Mass, we *come back* to Mass from having been sent to love and serve the Lord. The first thing we do is admit “what we have done” and “what we have failed to do,” which is to help bring about God’s will on Earth as it (already) is in Heaven.



When I first read *The Mass Is Never Ended*, I knew I had found a “new way of seeing” the Mass, one that I had never considered before. The Pastoral Center has taken this approach and adapted it into a “Teaching Mass” script for parish use, especially during the Revival. Now I am honored to write the Foreword to this new edition of Greg’s book, and I offer it to you in the spirit in which it was written: the spirit of the Dismissal, the “Sending Forth” that ends each and every Mass we ever attend.

Introduction



If we get the Dismissal Rite right, we get the Mass right.
And if we get the Mass right, we get it all right.

Why is this book Catholic, and why is it (mostly) for laypeople?

It is obviously not just we lay Catholics who yearn for happiness, holiness, and fulfillment. And Catholics are not the only ones who need mission, community, and spirituality in our lives. In fact, much of what is written here I have learned in collaborating with my fellow Christians belonging to other denominations and from those of other faith traditions entirely.

Mission, community, and spirituality are basic human needs, and all people—even those who profess no religious beliefs at all—seek to fulfill them. This is so true that I have learned to speak of these matters in broad ecumenical and interfaith language and will continue to do so. But as a lifelong Catholic who appreciates the richness of Catholic tradition on these issues, I glory in

the opportunity to address my fellow Catholics directly, using our history, language, and symbols to illuminate my points. Most of all I appreciate the opportunity to consider in depth the richness of our liturgy in supporting our mission, community, and spirituality. If others wish to peek over our shoulders or listen in on our conversation, they are welcome. But this will be a Catholic book.



My work is important to me, and your work probably is to you. It is what most of us do during most of our waking time. By work, I do not mean paid employment, although for many of us our jobs are a huge part of the work we do. By work, I mean anything that is *not* “not-work.” Sleeping, for example, is not work for most of us, but I guess it could be for some. Going to the beach with little kids may be a vacation, but any of us who have done it know that there can be considerable work involved. We all know that leisure and rest and fun and hobbies are important—God thought it was so important that the Sabbath was decreed—and for the most part these activities are not work. Work is all our *other* activity, all that is *not* “not-work.”

In this book, I will argue that work—at least all good work—includes all the activity we do to help make the world a better place, a place more like the way God would have things, what Jesus of Nazareth called the *kingdom* or the *reign* of God—what my former pastor,

Fr. Leo Mahon, described as “the way God would have things.”

I know this sounds a little pious, and most of us do not think or speak about our work like this most of the time. Nor, in truth, should we, for it would certainly put off some of our friends and colleagues in the workplace. When seen as the way we carry out our Christian mission, however, work takes on a much more noble status. It is no longer merely labor or toil or the daily grind. It is certainly not some kind of punishment for the sins of our forebears or an unfortunate result of the human condition. If our work—paid or unpaid, fulfilling or not, socially recognized or insignificant—is the primary way we help make the world a better place, then it is by definition important, meaningful, and holy.



Work is the way we Christians carry out a mission that is worthy of our lives because it is a mission that was given to us by the Son of God himself. While we may not always be aware of or even accept this mission, it is always there, always calling us, always able to be grasped and acted upon. And when we do act upon it, we do so by our work in the world.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could realize this at all times? What would the world look like if there were millions of people running around who viewed their primary purpose in life to make this world into a “New

Jerusalem,” a place where God’s will is done “on Earth as it is in Heaven”? What would we be like, and how would we approach all the work we do if we were aware that we were doing God’s work as we did our own work? My guess is that we would do a lot of things differently; that we would be happier, more fulfilled, and have a greater sense of accomplishment, no matter what kind of work we were doing.

But you say your work is not like that at all, or at least not very often. You say your work is difficult or meaningless or even evil at times. You quote Chicago newspaper columnist Mike Royko (“If work is so great, why do they have to pay us to do it?”) or comedian Lily Tomlin (“The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat!”).

And how about your fellow workers—your bosses, colleagues, employees, competitors? You say *they* are certainly not trying to bring about the kingdom of God on Earth! Here, too, you may be right, but you may also be exaggerating. Maybe *some* of the people you work with are not on the same page, but maybe some of the others are just like you, waiting for someone else to be first out the church door to take on this crazy mission of transforming the world.

Wouldn’t it be great if those of us who believed in this mission could get together once a week (or even more often occasionally) to remind ourselves of our mission, to reflect on how we are doing, to thank and ask God for forgiveness and help, to be strengthened and trained and

motivated to go back out and give it another try? Even better, wouldn’t it be great if our church could design a liturgy that would accomplish all this?



The main thesis of this book is that in the Catholic Church we already have such a liturgy. It is called *the Mass*, which can be loosely translated as “The Sending Forth.” Specifically, the Dismissal Rite at the end of Mass is supposed to send the entire congregation out into the world: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord”; “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”; or simply, “Go in peace.” This means we are being called to help carry out the mission of Jesus to proclaim and inaugurate the kingdom or reign of God. When seen through the lens of the Dismissal, the entire Mass is aimed at this sending forth, and every single person in the congregation, including the celebrant, is being sent on a mission that is truly worthy of his or her life.

How we carry out this mission is primarily through our work: on our jobs, with our families, and through our community and civic involvement. To accomplish this mission, we will need a spirituality that will both raise our awareness of the presence of God in our workplace and allow that awareness to inform how we will act. I call that kind of spirituality “the spirituality of work,” and this book concludes with a description of that type of spirituality.

I am a husband and father of three thirty-something adults. I am a writer, editor, and publisher, and I own and

run a small business. I am active in civic issues and volunteer community organizations. I coached kids' baseball for more than ten years and taught high school religious education for seven. All of this is my work, and yours is probably very much the same—if not in content, then in intensity.

Any insights in this book have been gleaned from my now seventy-five-plus years as a baptized Christian, husband, and father grappling with what it means to be a human being, a believer in a loving God, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, and a member of the Catholic Church. Yet these are not my thoughts alone. I believe they are the experience of a large number of followers of Christ over the centuries, including those of other denominations, who have shared my sense of mission and have encountered the holy, the sacred, the divine, the transcendent, the ultimately meaningful in the midst of—not away from—the hustle and bustle of their daily lives. I have been helped by many people, especially those connected with the National Center for the Laity.

So let us go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord, glorifying God with our lives.

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Chicago, Illinois
Pentecost Sunday, 2023

part one



A Mission Worthy of Our Lives

Body and soul, I am marvelously made!
I worship in adoration—what a creation!
You know me inside and out,
you know every bone in my body;
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculpted from nothing into something.
Like an open book,
you watched me grow from conception to birth;
all the stages of my life were spread out before you,
The days of my life all prepared
before I'd even lived one day.

Psalm 139:14-16
(*The Message*)

Vocation and Mission for All



There are two words we laypeople need to redeem from misuse and misunderstanding: *vocation* and *mission*. Actually, they are yin and yang descriptions of the same reality: the call to us from God to do something with our lives, and the sending forth of us by God to do that exact thing.

I realized a long time ago that the vocation and mission I *have* are *not* the vocation and mission I thought I *didn't have*. Let me explain. When I was about thirteen years old, I thought I might “have a vocation.” Back then, that meant I thought maybe I should become a priest. So I entered the diocesan seminary at age thirteen. At about seventeen years old, I thought I might have mission. Back then, that meant maybe I should be a foreign missionary. So off I went to a college seminary for missionary priests.

It took me until I was about twenty-one years old to realize that I was not meant to be either a priest or a missionary. Thus, I concluded that I had neither a vocation nor a mission. Some people were called or sent, I thought,

but I was not one of them. I was fine with this decision and went out into the world to make my way.



Years later, when I was in my thirties and forties, it began to occur to me that perhaps I still *did* have a vocation and mission—not as a priest or missionary but to a secular profession or career. Perhaps I was being called or sent to be a community organizer, or a writer, or a publisher, or a husband, or a father, or a mentor to young adults—all of which I eventually became. After all, the church teaches that we are all the Body of Christ, the People of God, modern-day disciples, and that the laity have special roles to play in and to the world. Maybe my vocation/mission was as a layperson.

So I began to talk about it that way for a while, but I ran into problems. For one thing, a lot of laypeople did not like to talk about their work or their lives as a vocation or a mission. I remember learning this from a friend who is a garbage collector for the city of Chicago. He was the best garbage collector I have met: conscientious, honest, intelligent, friendly. He worked primarily to make a living and provide for his family, and when suggested that this was some kind of mission or call from God, he actually laughed at me. He was more than willing to do his job and do it well, and he was even willing to agree that his work had social value. But he did not need to have his work “baptized” with a religious word such as *mission* or

vocation. In fact, I think he was a little offended by the very idea.

I encountered many other people who did not view their work as a calling or mission. Sometimes people hate their jobs or their working conditions, and they cannot imagine that God wants them to do it. Others feel they are making very little contribution to the world by the particular work that they do. “I’m just an accountant (truck driver, waitress, salesperson, etc.),” they say. Or, even if they see some social value to their own work, they name plenty of other jobs that don’t have any. Or people are unemployed or retired, often not by their own choosing, and it seems silly to call that a vocation or mission. All these situations seem to lead to the conclusion that some people (who have interesting, important, meaningful work) have a vocation or mission in life and other people do not, which doesn’t seem right somehow.

Then there were those who tried to define vocation or mission by “state in life.” Under this idea, you were called or sent to be either married (with or without children), widowed (with or without children), single (with or without children), vowed religious, or ordained. That way “everybody” had a vocation. The problem with this approach is that some people did not like the state of life they were in: Single people wanted to be married, married couples wanted to have kids, some religious and ordained wanted to be laicized, some laypeople wanted to be ordained. I remember commissioning a woman to write a book on the joy and beauty of the single life, but

then she called me several months later to say she had just gotten engaged! And try telling single parents that God is calling or sending them forth to raise their kids on their own. “Thanks a lot, God!” might be their sarcastic reply.

On top of the feedback people were giving me on the question of vocation and mission, my own experience was telling me that God was not sitting somewhere holding a list with my name on it (or not on it, for that matter) with the vocation/mission I was supposed to be following clearly listed. For one thing, I obviously had many different kinds of work going on in my life. Some of my jobs were interesting and fulfilling and socially meaningful, and others were not. I was married, divorced, and had no children. Then I became happily married and had three children in twenty months. Was I called to the married and parental state all along, or only when I was successful at it?

Finally, I came to the conclusion that the concept of mission or vocation was not a useful one in my life. If everything that anyone does is a vocation, then it is a pretty meaningless concept. If, on the other hand, only certain people have a vocation and most don’t, then it is an elitist and ultimately not very helpful concept.

Recently, however, I have been working more as a mentor with young adults. It strikes me that one of the things young people are looking for today is a vocation or mission

worthy of their lives. They may not articulate this, but as they are deciding whether or not to go to college, what to study or major in, what kind of job or career they might pursue, whether or not they want to get married, what kind of person they might want to marry, whether or not they might want to have children and how they would want to raise their children, where they might want to live, how to take care of their aging parents. What they are really asking is what the meaning of their particular life is...or might be.

This has led me to revisit my own understanding of the vocation/mission question, and I finally ask it the right way. What I say to myself is this: *Is there anything in my life that I have always felt called or compelled to do, any drive or impulse that I have ultimately been unable to ignore?* The answer is yes, there is. Ever since I was a young man, I have felt the strongest of urges to try to help make the world a better place. I don’t know exactly where this feeling comes from. I am sure it is in great part due to my parents and the rest of my family and friends, to my wife and children, to my education and the countless books I have read, and to what I have learned sitting through literally thousands of Masses and religious education classes and programs.

I have no other imperative in my life that is as strong as this one, except maybe survival and protecting my family. It is so strong, in fact, that—for the first time in my life—I feel comfortable in calling it a vocation or mission from God. I can ignore it, but it does not go away. I am

happier when I am following it than when I am not. It is something that gives integrity and meaning to all the other choices I have and continue to make in my life.

Could it be that I have had this vocation/mission all my life and have just never been able to recognize or articulate it? Could it be that all people have such a calling, such a mission worthy of their life, embedded in their very soul?



Certainly, people will differ in how they describe their vocation/mission. Some might say they are driven to creating beauty, and everything in their lives revolves around that. Others might cite fighting for freedom or justice, or pursuing adventure, or sating their intellectual curiosity. Some might name developing relations among family or friends as their guiding principle, while still others might describe their vocation/mission as serving others.

Are all of these the same vocation? I am tempted to say that they are, but I don't want to presume. The key element, however, would be that the vocation/mission initiates with God and culminates with God as well. It is the strength, the inevitability, and the persistence of the call or commission that determine its divine origin.

What about vocations/missions that are not from God? What if someone really feels, for example, that his or her purpose in life is to make as much money as possible, and that nothing else matters? But since a vocation/

mission is between us and God, perhaps there is no way of ultimately deceiving ourselves on this issue. In other words, the only true vocation/mission is the one for which we have been given both talent and opportunity to follow, and God gives each one of us several vocations/missions during our lifetime that are truly worthy of our lives. We either accept them or we don't, discern them or not. But they are not something we can make up or kid ourselves about.

Does everyone have a vocation/mission? I now say yes, almost unequivocally. Do we all recognize, understand, and accept that vocation/mission? No, at least not on a conscious level. But we may act on it in any case. Is everyone's vocation/mission the same? Not in the sense that we would explain or describe it in the same words, but certainly in the sense that St. Paul described: "We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose, and he has always known who his chosen ones would be" (Romans 8:28-29). For how could God's callings or commissions be at cross-purposes to one another?

This sense of vocation/mission is critical when it comes to practicing the spirituality of work, for unless we are clear about it, we cannot see how our daily work—both of the paid and the unpaid variety—serves our greater purpose in life. And when it comes time for the Dismissal from Mass, we have to know what we are being sent forth to do: We are not merely being dismissed to go do our various jobs; we are being sent forth to fulfill

our shared vocation/mission to help make the world more like God—the Father, the Almighty, the maker of Heaven and Earth—would have it. That is truly a mission worthy of *anyone's* life.

A Story about Vocation/Mission

Four stone masons were working on a cathedral:

“I am making a good living,” said the first.

“I am building a cathedral,” said the second.

“I am pursuing my career,” said the third.

“I feel compelled to make beautiful things,” said the fourth.

All four were called by God.

All four were sent by God.

All four fulfilled God's purpose.

The cathedral was built, it was beautiful,
and the world was a better place because of it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Is there anything you feel compelled to do, whether you have to or not, whether anyone sees it or not? What is it? Where do you think that drive comes from? Why?

2. How do the various jobs and volunteer activities you do fit in with the overall sense of purpose in your life? What do you do when you find they don't?
3. Give an example of a true vocation/mission and an example of a false one. Use examples from your own life if you have them. How can you tell the difference between a true and a false calling? How do you know one is from God and the other is not?

The Sending Forth



Near the end of Mass, my three then teens used to lean over and ask for the car keys. They want to get out and get going as soon as possible. My wife and I would tell them, “No, the most important part of the Mass is coming. We cannot leave until we have been sent forth.” They looked at us with the look only young people can muster that silently says, “Whatever,” and wait the extra minute or two until the Mass was completely over and they can take off.

In some ways, however, the kids had the right idea. The point of the Mass is not to hang around church afterwards, but to go back to our daily lives renewed and recommitted to our mission as followers of Jesus. But in other ways, our children would have missed the point of the entire Mass if they leave before the Dismissal.

Their mistake was understandable. First, they saw many of their elders heading for the exits, some as early as right after communion. Second, they had never been taught why the Dismissal is such an important part of the Mass. And finally, in our parish (and in most churches

they have attended), the Dismissal is done in such a perfunctory manner that it is hard for anyone to take it seriously. (In fact, it is often immediately preceded by a mind-numbingly long list of parish announcements.)

But if our three young adults got the real idea behind the Dismissal, then they learned why it is such a vital part of the Mass and so critical to how they live their lives and do their work as thirty-something adults today. The Dismissal will have become such an integral part of their work that they will have made it part of their life, which I believe all three of them have, in different ways.



The word *Mass* actually comes from the Latin words for the Dismissal, “*Ite, missa est*,” which mean “Go, we are sent forth.” Sometime in church history, some people thought this was an important enough part of the liturgy to name the entire thing after it. (The word *Mass* is actually from the Latin the Latin verb on which *missa* is based, *mitto*, *mittere*, which was originally a military term that had the connotation “to throw or to hurl.” Thus we get the modern English word *missile* from the same verb. We also get the words *mission*, *missionary*, and *dismissal*. So the Dismissal from Mass originally meant that we were being “shot like out of a cannon” back into the world to carry out a “mission” that was central to why we had come together to celebrate the Mass in the first place.

What is that mission? It is as amazing as it is obvious and misunderstood. It is the very mission on which Jesus sent his disciples over two thousand years ago. That mission is no less than to transform the world into a reality much more like the way God would have things.

This mission is, of course, impossible on the face of it. Not only is it obvious that we, the “people of God,” have not succeeded the entire time we have been on this mission, but it is also obvious that we will not succeed in accomplishing it in the future. So why even try?

We try because Jesus asked us to try. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke says, “For forty days after Jesus had suffered and died, he proved in many ways that he had been raised from death. He appeared to his apostles and spoke to them about God’s kingdom” (Acts 1:3). Imagine that! Of all the things that Jesus could have spoken to his disciples about, he picked one thing and one thing only to focus on: the coming reign of God, on Earth, as it already is in heaven.”

So when we are sent forth from the Mass, we are hurled forth to go out and try again to help transform this world along the lines God intended and Jesus preached. When looked at the right way, as “The Sending Forth,” the Mass is the perfect liturgy to help us accomplish this “mission impossible.”

And here is the best part. It doesn’t matter whether or not the priest or deacon or liturgist or homilist or presider or leader of song is clear on this. Of course, if they

are, it makes things easier for us. But all we laypeople have to do is be aware that the Mass is designed to send us forth (back into the world), and it will do its job. That's how brilliant the Mass is.

A Story about the Sending Forth

"This Sunday," said the presider,
 "we are going to honor all those in the congregation
 whose primary ministry is out in the world,
 helping to make the Earth more like
 the way things are in Heaven,
 where God's will is always done.

Will everyone in the congregation
 who participates in that ministry
 please come up around the altar so that
 the rest of us can bless you?"

When all those who participated in the ministry
 of the sending forth had come up around the altar,
 there was no one left in the pews to bless them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are you being sent forth from Mass to do, and where are you being sent forth to do it? Be specific.

That is, do not use the words "to love and serve the Lord" to describe the work—both paid and unpaid--you do and have done.

2. In what ways does your work on your job, with your family, and in your community involvement help build the kingdom of God on the Earth? In what ways does it at times prevent the way God would have things from coming to fruition?
3. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the full realization of the reign of God, where are your efforts on the following: your home; your workplace; your neighborhood; your city, state, country; the world? In each case, what might you do to raise your score?

The Coming Back



In today's Catholic liturgy, the Dismissal comes near the end of the Mass, immediately after the priest's final blessing. The priest (or deacon) says, "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord"; "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life"; or simply, "Go in peace." and we all reply, "Thanks be to God." There is nothing wrong with these words in and of themselves, although they lack some of the urgency of the Latin, "*Ite, missa est*," which can almost be translated: "Go, what are you standing around for? Get out of here. You are being sent forth to do something. Go do it!"



It is unfortunate that the Dismissal is done so poorly in most parishes. First, it is often preceded or (even worse) immediately followed by a long list of announcements about parish programs and activities. Nothing is wrong with this in and of itself, but it does tend to trivialize and lessen the impact of the Dismissal. Second, the

priest (or deacon) who delivers the words of Dismissal often does so in a voice without excitement or conviction, and the response of the congregation is almost equally uninspired—sounding almost like we are thanking God that the Mass is finally finished, rather than for the mission worthy of our lives on which we have just been sent.

The English words for Dismissal are also unfortunate. "Go in peace," is a fine sentiment, but unless it is carefully unpacked, it can sound as bland as, "Let us go and be nice people," or even "Goodbye; have a nice day." And the response "Thanks be to God," besides being used often throughout the Mass, is perhaps not the best reaction to being asked to perform an impossible task. "Lord, have mercy!" or even, "No, thanks, I tried that, and it didn't work," might be a more honest response.

But the real problem with the Dismissal is that it is often viewed as an isolated act that comes at the end of a fairly long liturgy and seems disconnected from what went before. The Dismissal should be the culmination of all that has happened before it, at Mass, and we and our fellow parishioners shouldn't dream of leaving before it occurs. Perhaps the Dismissal shouldn't even be at the end of the Mass, although that is probably too much to ask of our liturgists, but at the very least the Dismissal should be on everyone's mind throughout the liturgy, so that *when it occurs*, its significance *cannot be missed*. Here is a look at the Mass through the lens of the Dismissal, as if it were the most important part of the Mass.



Looking through the lens of the Dismissal, Catholics would never go to Mass or *come* to Mass or *attend* Mass or *participate at* Mass. Except for the very first time, which for most of us was in childhood, we Catholics would *come back* to Mass. We are coming back from having been *sent forth* from the previous Mass we attended!

There is no one who is exempt from this mission, from the priest and parish staff to every single member of the congregation. The mission is not to the parish or church or even to parish-sponsored ministries. The mission is to the world, including our jobs, our families and friends, our community and civic involvements. It is by virtue of our baptism and confirmation that we have been chosen for and accepted this mission. It is not optional, nor is it reserved for religious professionals or even the especially pious or holy. We are *all* sent forth, and now we are *all* returning from the mission.

So like the good friends and colleagues in mission that we are, we greet one another and sing a song. (Some parishes even have greeters at the doors to welcome people to Mass. If they had the Dismissal in mind, the greeters would be saying “Welcome back” rather than “Hello” or “Good Morning.”) Because our mission is important and because we know that the Mass is directly related to helping us carry it out, most of us would be on time most of the time. Having been in the “mission fields” for a while, we would know the importance of a liturgy that

was designed to celebrate our (few) victories and lick the wounds of our (many) failures. We would also know that we were going to be sent forth in an hour or so to carry out exactly the same mission we have been on all week, so we need all the help we can get before we go.

We finish the opening hymn, the presider welcomes us and reads a short prayer, and then we get our first reminder that we are going to be sent forth again. The priest suggests that we have all failed in some way, and we all agree. There is no show of hands for those who have sinned and those who have not. We each admit that we have failed in many ways, “in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.” Through the lens of the Dismissal, the main thing we have “failed to do” is to bring about that kingdom of God we were sent forth to help inaugurate. Oh, we may have tried. We may even have succeeded in some (usually small) ways. But overall and corporately, we have failed on the mission on which we were sent just a few days earlier.

Surprisingly, however, we don’t beat ourselves up about it. Instead, we ask for forgiveness—from God, from one another, from ourselves. We ask our Blessed Mother, the angels and saints, and our “brothers and sisters” present with us to “pray for me to the Lord, our God.” The priest asks God to “have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” We all recall that we are a forgiven people and are not expected to succeed all the time. We pray or sing, “Lord, have mercy.” And then, surprisingly, we are forgiven. It is as simple as that, partly

because—from the point of view of the Dismissal—we know we are going to be sent forth again soon and will have another chance.

Suddenly, we are so happy that we start singing again. This time it is the “Glory to God,” the ancient hymn of all Christians to express our joy a being part of the entire enterprise. We are in a line of over two thousand years of people coming together and then being sent forth again. So we give thanks to our God “in the highest” and ask for “peace to his people on earth.” Remember: In a little while we will be sent forth in that same peace to love and serve that same Lord. From the point of view of the Dismissal, our time together is already running out, and we still have a lot of work to do before we leave Mass, which we’ll look at in the next chapter.

A Story about Coming Back

The young college student finally
went to Mass at her school.

Her parents had been bugging her to go,
but that was not the reason she went.

She went because she felt defeated, empty, unhappy.

College was not what she had hoped it would be.

She couldn’t remember why
she had chosen this university.

She didn’t know what she wanted to study or why.

It was all too overwhelming for her.

When she walked into the church, however,
she felt as if she had come home.
She saw a lot of students who were just like her,
and some of them looked lost too.

The presider started the Mass with a flourish.

“We are going to send ourselves back out
into the world in about an hour,” he said,

“to transform it into a place much
more like God would have it.

We have all failed in this mission
since the last time we were together,
but God forgives us and we must forgive ourselves.”

“Lord, have mercy,” the girl said to herself.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. How well have you carried out your mission to help transform the world? Have you forgiven yourself for your failures, for “what you have done” and “what you have failed to do”? Name some of those things.
2. What would happen if people in your church felt they were “returning” to Mass from the mission they had been sent on the week before? Describe how that would change the nature of your worship services.