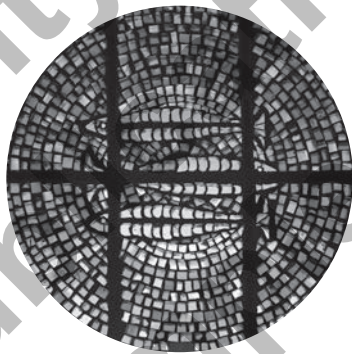


A Fresh Look at the Mass

A helpful guide to better understand
and celebrate the mystery



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Take a Fresh Look...

In over fifty years of presiding at Mass, I have come a long way. But I never realized my true role as priest until 2014, in the mud-hut village of Bongor, in Sierra Leone, Africa.

When we drove up in the parish pickup truck—an old Toyota that had not self-started in seven years—half the village was gathered in the dirt road in front of a mud-bricked, straw-roofed church, singing and dancing. They wore native dress and held wooden tom-toms, tambourines, and castanets.

A cantor was chanting over and over: “Gather, gather, People of God.” And as all answered, “Let us give praise and thanksgiving!” the people gathered, coming from all sides of the village. It was the first time I had ever experienced the “gathering song” as what it is named for.

When all were assembled, all dancing, all singing, the cantor changed the words of his chant to “We are the church; holy church-members, enter the church!” And they did, singing and dancing into the little church, building to the rhythm of the tom-toms and the shaking of the tambourines.

And I? I joined the procession, dancing at the end of the line. It was the first time I had ever been the priest at a Mass that

began with a whole community entering the church together to celebrate, and myself just one of the crowd.

Now...compare that with how you walk into church on Sunday. What are you feeling? What are you expecting? If you have kids, especially teenagers, what are they expecting? How do they feel about being there? Are they looking forward to celebrating? Or just resigned to enduring?

In our country, the congregation usually sits passively in church, backs to the door, waiting for the presiding priest to start down the aisle. Nothing happens until he does. His entrance begins the celebration. He is the principal figure. The message, unspoken but unconsciously taken for granted by most of the people there, is that the priest is the *only* one who counts. The Mass is something the priest does. What everybody else does is inessential. And many barely participate. They are “there.” In the old days, that’s all that was required, expected, or even allowed to the laity. That is our cultural heritage.

The truth is, the Mass is something Jesus does, and we are all there to do it with him. This is not clear to everyone yet.

But a new world is opening before us. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The Mass is being renewed. And the Mass is renewing us—wherever we are willing to let it.

So let’s take a deep breath, open our eyes, and take a fresh look at the Mass.

WHAT JESUS COUNTED ON

Imagine you are Jesus at the Last Supper. You are about to die. What will keep your followers together when you are gone? What will keep your words alive among them? What will keep their hearts on fire?

The Holy Spirit. Yes, but not blowing in a vacuum. Your followers are used to God being present among them as a human being, speaking words they can hear, doing things they can see. While you were with them, you kept them together. What will keep them together when you are gone?

The Mass. The celebration of Eucharist. That is the one and only thing. At the Last Supper, Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks (the Greek word from which “Eucharist” comes means to give thanks), broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). This is a *sacramental* remembrance: a remembrance that *makes present* what we remember.

In the Mass, Jesus is present and acting. That is where we encounter him—not alone, but in company with others: in a communal meal where we listen to his words together, respond to them together, and together experience his presence among us and within each one of us. The Mass holds together all who believe in him, to keep us instructed and our hearts aflame.

Pope Francis wrote: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus...I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, nos. 1, 3). The Mass is a way to do that every Sunday. All we have to do is *pay attention* while at Mass, understand what we are paying attention to, and enter into it.

The understanding part is what this book has to offer. When you finish it, I hope you will be thinking more deeply about what you are hearing and seeing at Mass. Then you will be more free to enter into it. If you do, you will experience Mass, not just attend it.

Gradually, your whole life will change.

A FRESH EXPECTATION

In the “old days” (meaning before the Second Vatican Council [1962-1965]), Catholics were taught that it was their obligation to “attend” Mass, just to be there. The focus was on time and space, not on the critical element of participation. A fresh look at the Mass will have us walking through the door prepared to celebrate, prepared to be caught up in the mystery of God, to experience interaction with God himself—Father, Son, and Spirit. We will be ready to praise and thank God. We will become more aware of the gift our life is when enhanced by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Walking into church will be like leaving Kansas for Oz—except that the “Oz” we are immersed in during Mass is the real world, and the “Kansas” of our cultural environment outside of Mass is largely make-believe. We will enter into Mass to be at home.

MYSTERY IS OUR HOME

Eucharist takes us—and also the world we live in, if we bring it to Mass with us—into the reality of *mystery*. Eucharist makes present to us what always was, is now, and always will be. Eucharist surrounds us with the pervading presence of infinite Being, infinite Truth and Love. Eucharist catches us up in the action of God that explains all actions and gives them their true value. Eucharist, if we know how to enter into it, makes us real.

We need to take a fresh look at Eucharist and see how it does this—to look at the Mass as if we had never seen or heard it before. If we do, we may find ourselves seeing and hearing things we have never seen or heard in our lives. We will come to experience Eucharist as “the source and summit,” the starting point and the high point of every week—indeed of our Christian life.

A fresh look at the Mass will give us a new way of seeing ourselves and, because of this, a new way of perceiving our participation in the celebration. We won’t be there to “hear” Mass, or even to “follow” the Mass as the priest celebrates it. We will be there to *offer* Mass together with Jesus and others—*with* Christ and *as* Christ—to offer Jesus to the Father for the life of the human race, and to offer ourselves with him and in him: our flesh with his “for the life of the world.”

The first sign of this new look will be that we won’t wait for the presider to “begin Mass.” From the very first moment of the celebration, we will experience ourselves making the Mass happen. We will be doing it—living it, loving it. We will begin by entering into the first hymn, the “gathering song,” with enthusiasm, listening to the words of the hymn and drawing upon them to give our excitement focus. Sometimes we might even dance!

From the very first moment of the celebration, we will experience ourselves making the Mass happen.

For prayer and discussion

- What do you think about on your way to Mass?
- How do you feel about going to Mass?
- How would you feel about dancing into church?
- Do you see Mass more as something the priest does or you do?
- What difference would it make in your life if you couldn't get to Mass?
- Do you feel like pursuing this? Do you think it might help you bring others back to Mass?

“In the name...”

The World of Relationship with God

A fresh look at the Mass literally takes us “out of this world.” The very first words the presider speaks lift us up into a new world. We enter the world of *mystery*—the world of conscious relationship with God.

What gives us the right to gather for Mass?

What allows us ordinary people to presume the privilege of an audience with God? Or the right to ask God for anything—especially if we venture to speak for others? Who are we to even lift up our voices to praise God? Are we on a high-enough level to praise the infinite Being of God? God’s incomprehensible Goodness, Truth, and Beauty? By what right do we deal with God at all? In whose name, by whose invitation, do we present ourselves at the door?

It is “in the name of the Father!”

We are here because the Father has “held us worthy to be in his presence and minister to him.” We are here “in the name of

the Father,” because we are the family he wants to be here with him.

And we present ourselves “in the name of the Son,” our “Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate these mysteries.” Because he said, “Do this in memory of me.”

“And of the Holy Spirit,” because we are gathered, not just in the name of obedience to church law, or of our common faith as Catholics, or even in the name of the personal desire each of us has to worship God. We are gathered in the “communion of the Holy Spirit.” In everything we say and do, we will be giving expression to the Spirit surging and singing within us. We assemble in the name of the Holy Spirit, who “fills the hearts of his faithful, and enkindles in them the fire of his divine love.”

The opening words of the Mass are a propulsion into mystery.

We are gathering “in the name of” the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity! That means we are caught up in the infinite mystery of God. We are entering into conscious relationship with God himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.

And since every relationship is a way of *interacting* with another, the Mass is gathering us together to interact with God the “Father,” as infinite Being and Goodness; with God the Son, as “Word” of God, infinite Truth; and with God the “Holy Spirit,” as infinite Love.

This catches us up into the mystery of God’s divine life—the interaction taking place between the Three Persons of God.

REAL WORLD—UNREAL WORLD

We may think of the celebration of Eucharist, not as the beginning of our week, but as a “time out,” after which we return to the “real” world of family, school and social life, business and politics. Nothing could be more mistaken.

To be “real,” the world must have all the authentic dimensions of human life that Saint Paul held up to us: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18–19).

The problem is, our secular culture frequently blurs these dimensions. The false world of “secular culture” in which we live doesn’t acknowledge relationship with God. It doesn’t deny it either. It just ignores it, which takes it out of our consciousness more than denial would. Our society doesn’t remind us of God, doesn’t call us to praise, thank, or worship the Three Persons, doesn’t summon us to prayer. Except for the presence of church buildings with their singular architecture, nothing in the city reminds us that God exists.

True, if we “have eyes to see,” we can see through all creation to the Creator. We can recognize God’s gift and presence in everything around us, and we can praise and thank God. But nothing in the man-made environment we call our “culture” calls us to this. Wordsworth protested poetically against it:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not....

The world we live and play and work in just passes over in silence what is most deep, most true, most important, most all-present in human life. That world is unreal. So we return again to Mass to renew our contact with reality.

Mass *is* the real world, a world in which everything we hear and see speaks to us about the authentic relationship between God and all creation. The real world reflects the Existence from which all existence comes: the existence of God, who is Existence itself. And God's existence, we know from revelation, is *relationship*: the Three Persons are "one in Being," but differ through their relationship (interaction) with each other. Their identity as Father, Son, and Spirit becomes clear through the different facets of the Godhead each reveals. So all existence that comes from God is characterized by relationship. Our true identity—who we are—is determined by our relationships, by our interaction with other beings and with God himself.

To be aware of ourselves as authentic human beings, we have to interact with God as Creator, through praise and thanksgiving. To know ourselves as children of God by baptism, we have to interact with God as Father. Jesus taught us how to do this (see Matthew, chapters five and six). To enter into personal relationship with Jesus, we have to interact with him as human persons interact with each other. To realize we have received the Holy Spirit, we have to interact with him, asking and listening for his inspirations. By the gift of divine life we are caught up in the knowing, loving interaction of the Three Persons. The real world is a world that acknowledges this.

And to be authentic members of the human race, we have to interact with one another as persons, the way the Father, Son, and Spirit interact with each other: "equal in majesty, undivided in splendor." As persons we all are equal; nothing differentiates

us except the way we freely interact with God, each other, and the world.

That is not the world we live in. It is a world we are called to *create*—to fashion out of everything that makes up our daily life. And the Mass is our weekly starting point.

THE “SIGN OF THE CROSS”

When we begin Eucharist “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” we enter explicitly into the real world: the world of relationship—of interaction—with God.

The Sign of the Cross is the oldest Christian profession of faith. In the late second century, Tertullian wrote: “In all our travels and movements, when coming in and going out, when putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever we are doing, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.”

What are we saying when we do this?

First we lift up our hand—and heart—to heaven, as many do when they pray to God. But the difference is, we put our hand on our *head*, on our forehead, to say we *know* him. He is not “the man upstairs” for us; he is our *Father*. He gives us his own divine life. Then we bring our hand *down* and place it on our heart to say God came down from heaven as Jesus the *Son* to be one of us, to take flesh and live in us as his body on earth. He lives and acts *with us*, *in us*, and *through us* to continue his mission of giving life to the world. Then we sweep our hand in an arc from one shoulder to the other to say that the *Holy Spirit* is within us, sending us out and empowering us to unite the whole world in one divine family of love.

All of this expresses the meaning, and is the fruit, of the *cross*,

on which, by baptism, we died in Christ and rose again with him as a “new creation.” If we understand the Sign of the Cross, we understand the mystery of Christianity.

At Mass we begin our week with the Sign of the Cross. It expresses the *identity* we have through relationship with the Three Persons of God. We can use it all week to remind us of who we are. We can “extend the Mass” by making the sign of the cross when we wake up and go to bed, when we sit down to table or get into the car, whenever we turn on a computer or pick up a cell phone.

The Mass reminds us to do everything we do “*in the name*” of the relationship we have with Father, Son, and Spirit. Why not carry that reminder into the world outside? By making the sign of the cross, we can express all week long our awareness of the relationship that people have with each other and with God that we receive at Mass.

For prayer and discussion

- Do you ever feel that you or people around you are living a “low ceiling life”—that is, one that doesn’t give a human room to breathe?
- What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of being a Christian? Is it interacting with the Father, Son, and Spirit in a personal relationship?
- What do you see or hear at work, on the street, in stores, or even at home that reminds you of the *breadth and length and height and depth* of human life as Jesus revealed it? How do you see and hear these dimensions celebrated at Mass?
- What do you do—all day and every day—that reminds you of your relationship with God?
- How often do you make the sign of the cross? Do you think you should make it in public?
- In your opinion, what is the most striking reality expressed in the Mass? Is this passed over in silence in ordinary life? If so, how does that affect daily living?