

THRESHOLD  
BIBLE STUDY

# THE MASS

*Stephen J. Binz*



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**Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.**

1 CORINTHIANS 11:28–29

## The Mass

**F**rom the procession to the altar and the sign of the cross to the final blessing and sending forth, the eucharistic liturgy of the church is a mosaic of words, images, and actions drawn from sacred Scripture. The Bible leads us to the altar of the Lord. There the purpose and meaning of the sacred texts are fulfilled in the holy Eucharist.

Though the Mass may seem complicated to outside observers, its structural design is really quite simple and is derived from the rites of ancient Israel. It is composed of two essential and interrelated parts: the proclamation of Scripture and the ritual at the altar. In both movements, we encounter the risen Christ and are formed into his church. Worship of God in the Mass is the most distinctive activity of Christ's church, the summit toward which all the church's activity is directed and also the font from which its life flows.

The celebration of Eucharist by the earliest Christians forms the background out of which all of the writings of the New Testament were formed. For this reason, none of its texts offer a systematic explanation of the method and meaning of the church's worship. Instead, we will study passages from throughout the Bible, and through a reflective process, we will grow to understand and honor the Mass and all its many elements.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what sense can we say that the Bible and the Mass were made for each other?
  
- In what way do I experience the eucharistic liturgy as the summit and font of the church's life?

### **Eucharistic Liturgy in the Early Church**

The liturgy of the church, of which we receive glimpses throughout the New Testament, is described by the second-century theologian Justin Martyr. In his First Apology, written in about 155, he describes what eucharistic worship looked like in his church in Rome. Justin writes that the Christians gather on the day called Sunday because “Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.” On that day, “all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place.”

In the first part of the service, “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.” This consists of the reading of Scripture: both the Scriptures of Israel, which we know as the Old Testament, and the new writings of the apostles, which we know as the gospels, letters, and other New Testament writings. The presider then offers a homily based on these readings: “the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.” After this, the assembly rises together and offers prayers of intercession, “heartily prayers in common for ourselves and for all others in every place.” The prayers are then followed by the exchange of a kiss (the Peace).

In the second part of the service, bread and wine are brought forward, and over them the presider offers the Eucharistic Prayer. Justin describes it thus:

There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and taking them, he gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being accounted worthy to receive these things at

his hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen.

Justin describes the communion as a distribution and a participation in the elements over which the presider has prayed: “There is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.” He says that this food is shared only by those baptized into Christ, those who share the beliefs of the church and live according to Christ’s teaching.

And this food is called among us Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the one who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.

Justin goes on to identify the food of the Eucharist as “the flesh and blood” of Jesus. He states that this food, through “transmutation,” nourishes the blood and flesh of the participants. This teaching is in faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus passed on by the apostles through the gospels.

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of his word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, This do in remembrance of Me, this is My body; and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, This is My blood; and gave it to them alone.

Finally, Justin’s writings state that after the liturgy, the Christians continually remind each other of what they have shared and what their Eucharist has enjoined upon them: “And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker

of all through his Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit.” In their daily lives, they give thanks to God for all things and willingly give to those in need.

The structure of worship seems firmly in place: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The proclamation of Scripture, followed by the homily, intercessory prayers, and the kiss of peace, make up the first part of the service. The liturgy at the altar consists of bringing bread and wine to the table, an extended eucharistic prayer including praise and thanksgiving to the Father and the words of institution of Jesus from the gospels, and the participation in the body and blood of Christ for those who have been baptized.

For Justin and the early Christians, the eucharistic liturgy was not simply a ceremony. It defined the church. It was the way in which Christ was present to his people across time. In the Eucharist, the Word made flesh continued to give his flesh and blood for them and to dwell with them, just as he does today.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Which elements of Justin’s description of the eucharistic liturgy most closely parallel the Mass as it is celebrated today?
  
- Why was the eucharistic food to be shared only by those who have been baptized and who share the faith of the church?

### **The Essential Meaning of the Mass**

The Bible offers numerous clues that lead us to a more comprehensive understanding of early Christian worship. Our interpretation is mistaken if we try to reduce the liturgical practice of the church to a single all-inclusive meaning. Rather, by studying the Scriptures, we can define several dimensions of meaning within the Mass. Here we briefly describe five of these facets, which will be explored more fully throughout this study.

**Thanksgiving.** The thanksgiving sacrifice of the Old Testament was offered by a person whose life had been redeemed or delivered from a great danger. The person who had been delivered would express his gratitude to God by celebrating a sacrificial meal with bread and wine among family and

friends. During the meal, a psalm was sung that narrated the impending danger and plea for deliverance followed by thanksgiving and praise to God. The annual Passover was the collective thanksgiving sacrifice for Israel. In the narrative accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus first takes the bread and wine and gives thanks. The word “Eucharist” literally means “thanksgiving.” Eucharist became the church’s central act of thanksgiving to God for the gifts of creation and for the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ.

**Remembrance.** As the Passover makes the exodus of Israel and its liberating effects present for every generation, the Eucharist makes the death and resurrection of Jesus and its saving effects present each time it is celebrated. These sacramental actions are not just a form of mental recall. Though both actions happened once in the past, they are made present again or re-presented each time they are commemorated in sacred ritual. Jesus’ actions in the Upper Room were accompanied by the instruction to “do this in remembrance of me.” Each time the church celebrates the eucharistic liturgy, the saving events it commemorates become contemporary to those engaged in it. Through this covenant renewal, the everlasting sacrifice of Christ is made truly present in every time and place.

**Covenant sacrifice.** In the Old Testament, sacrifices involved offerings of animals as well as grains, bread, and wine. The sacrifice often included a holy meal, which completed the offering and gave participants a way to share in the benefits of the sacrifice. Covenants were always sealed with the blood of sacrifice, and the periodic renewal of a covenant consisted of the proclamation of Scripture, a sacrificial offering, and a sacred meal. The sacrifice of Jesus was so decisive for humanity’s salvation that he offered himself and returned to the Father only after he left us a means of sharing in that sacrifice. At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the new covenant sealed in his blood. As we renew this covenant in every Mass, Jesus offers his body “given for you” and his blood “poured out for you.” His one sacrifice is sacramentally re-presented on the altars of his church throughout the world.

**Communion.** Paul describes the eucharistic liturgy of the church as a real participation in the risen life of Christ: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” The Greek word translated “sharing” is *koinonia*, an intimate communion. The one who gave himself completely for us on



the cross continues to give himself, to share his life completely with us. John tells us that the Word made flesh gives us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink for our eternal life. In Eucharist, Christ is truly present—body and blood, soul and divinity—giving himself as our spiritual food and nourishment.

***Anticipation of Christ’s return.*** The church’s liturgy not only looks back to the Last Supper and the Lord’s passion but also looks forward to the banquet in that new world God wants to create. By offering us a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised to us, the Eucharist allows us a glimpse of heaven on earth and plants a confident hope in our daily commitments. It offers us a deep sense of responsibility for creation, obliging us to seek God’s will on earth, committing us to transforming the world in harmony with God’s plan. The exclamation “*Maranatha!*” (“Come, Lord!”) is drawn from the eucharistic liturgy of the apostolic church and appears at the end of the book of Revelation. It expresses the simultaneous belief in Christ’s eucharistic presence with the church and hope for his glorious coming.

All of these dimensions of meaning are found simultaneously in every Mass. The memory of the past and the expectation of a glorious future come together in the eternal eucharistic moment. In the Mass, God wants to make us alive in a new way, like he did for Jesus on the first day of the week. As we receive God’s creative word and are nourished by Christ’s body and blood, we are filled with the Holy Spirit and experience the new creation. We can proclaim to the world that forgiveness has been given and death has been defeated. We don’t have to wait until after death to receive eternal life; we already possess it in our sacramental union with Christ.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Why is it misleading and simplistic to attempt to reduce the Mass to a single, all-inclusive meaning?
  
- What is most puzzling to me about the church’s liturgy? What would I like to understand more?