

Catholic

UPDATE

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A WALK THROUGH THE MASS

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

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Rituals, by their nature, tend to be fixed and unchanging. Think of rituals in daily life: set ways of shaking hands, eating with a fork, responding to a letter. When we're accustomed to a certain way of doing things, we seldom ask why we do it that way.

In the Eucharist, too, we have many ritual actions we perform over and over without asking why. In this *Catholic Update*, we'll walk through the ritual prayers and actions of the Eucharist to examine why we do what we do at Mass.

WHAT IS THE MASS?

The core of the Eucharist never changes. The Mass is Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council brought together these three mysteries in a description of the Mass recalling the Last Supper, the sacrifice of the cross, and Easter Sunday.

But the Mass isn't merely a meal reminding us of the Last Supper, a passion play recalling Good Friday, or a sunrise service celebrating the resurrection. In the Eucharist, "the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so



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that these are in some way made present in every age in order that the faithful may lay hold of them and be filled with saving grace" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 102). At every

Eucharist, in a real yet mystical way, we become present to these central mysteries of our Faith.

The events of Holy Thursday give us the key for understanding the "shape" of our eucharistic ritual. What do we do at a formal meal? We gather with family and friends, talk and share our stories, and then move to the table. The food is brought to the table, we say grace, pass the food, and eat and drink. Finally, we take our leave and return to our homes. The Mass has these same four movements: (1) gathering, (2) storytelling, (3) meal sharing, and (4) commissioning.

The Gospel of Luke walks us through the Mass in the story of disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13–35). Two disciples are walking along when a stranger catches up to them: (1) they gather, (2) they tell their story and recall the Scriptures, (3) they recognize him in the "breaking of bread," and (4) they dash back to Jerusalem to share their joy with the other disciples. Notice the same four movements: gathering, storytelling, meal sharing, and commissioning. Let's take a closer look at each.