

Mass 101

Liturgy and Life

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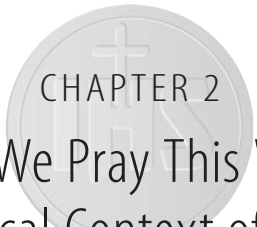
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CHAPTER 2

Why We Pray This Way: The Historical Context of the Mass

The best way to get to understand people is to discover their story: Where did they come from? How did they come to be where they are now? What struggles and challenges have they met along the journey? Discovering the answers to such questions helps you understand who they are now and what inspires them to feel, act, think, and relate the way they do. Knowing their stories will often help you connect more deeply with people out of compassion for them or through shared experiences.

The same can be said of the Mass. This ancient act of prayer that we celebrate each Sunday has a long, rich, and fascinating past. Knowing something of the historical context of the Mass helps those of us who celebrate it make a stronger connection with the way we worship and even with the saints and all the faithful who celebrated it long before us.

The story of the Mass begins with another story, from chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel, about the disciples encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In a way, this story gives us the earliest model of Christian worship and shows us the centrality of Christ therein. In the story, the disciples meet the risen Jesus on the road—though his identity is hidden from them—and he interprets the Scriptures for them. Then he joins them in a meal, and in the blessing and breaking of the bread they recognize him as the Christ, but upon this recognition he disappears from their sight. In this ancient and beautiful story, we see the early shape

and character of Christian liturgy: a simple yet profound sharing of the Word and meal of thanksgiving in which Christ himself is present, though in a shrouded and mysterious way.

How then did the worship of the Christians progress as it moved into a post-ascension world? What characterized the Mass in the early centuries of the Church, and how did it grow, change, and develop in the ages that followed?

THE EIGHTH DAY

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) from Vatican II rightly refers to Sunday as the foundation of the entire liturgical year.⁷ This parallels the idea that Christ's resurrection is the foundation of the whole Church, for the resurrection is what Sunday stood for to the earliest Christians. This connection between Sunday and the resurrection is firmly established in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' rising from the tomb. All the evangelists agree this glorious event occurred on the first day of the week, which in the Jewish world was the day after the Sabbath: Sunday.

For the early Church, there was a strong distinction between the Jewish Sabbath and the "Lord's day" of the Christians. In fact they were different days: Sabbath was (and is) observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Important differences separated them conceptually as well, yet the distinction between them eroded over time and remains weak today. To uncover what Sunday meant and still means for Christians, it is helpful to separate it from the Jewish idea of Sabbath. While both the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday were times for the community's worship, there was no prohibition from work for Christians on Sunday as for Jews on the Sabbath; Sunday was in fact a normal workday in that time period. Christians would have abided by the Roman pagan culture's workweek, yet they

went about their labor knowing that first day of the week was a day outside of time itself. In a seven-day week, Christians called Sunday “the Eighth Day.” Sunday was, as Psalm 118 describes, a day made by the Lord: a day for miracles, a day penetrated with the presence of God, who creates the world anew through the resurrection of his Son. The resurrection occurring on the first day of the week recalled for these Jewish-Christians the first day in the creation story of Genesis on which God separates the light of day from the darkness of night; the Christians knew themselves to be called, as the First Letter of Peter professes, out of the darkness of sin and into the wondrous light of life in Christ. Though every day was for living this new life, Sunday was the day to celebrate it and to sustain it through the sharing of the Eucharist. (Early on in Christianity, since days were reckoned to begin with the setting of the sun, Christians’ observance of the Lord’s day would take place at the earliest “Sunday” opportunity: on Saturday night, but this was soon transferred to Sunday.⁸)

This distinction between the Lord’s day and the Jewish Sabbath points up an important characteristic of the earliest Christians: their expectation of the end times as imminent. The Gospels record Jesus’ many teachings about the end of the world, so it is no wonder his disciples came to expect this end sooner rather than later—in their own lifetimes for certain. The earliest Christians’ thoroughly eschatological (from the Greek word *eskhaton* meaning “last” and referring to the last days of the world) outlook shaped everything about their experience and the character of the early Church. For instance, it helps us understand, in part, why the Gospel accounts were not written down for a few generations after the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Instead they were told orally at Christian gatherings. Among other reasons, it also helps explain why buildings dedicated solely to Christian worship were

not erected for the community for generations. When the end of the world is nearly upon us, one does not focus on things and places but on what matters most: living the life given to us in Christ and looking forward to witnessing the fulfillment of God's plan for the cosmos.

Just think of that! How would your life be affected by the knowledge that the end of time was around the corner? Maybe it would happen next Thursday, maybe next year, maybe tomorrow...maybe it is happening already. How would your day-to-day activities change? How would you choose to spend your time, and with whom? Perhaps it is important to note that the early Church's instincts in those first "last days" led them to celebrate the Eucharist. The instinctive actions of a thoroughly eschatological *ekklesia* (St. Paul's term for "Church") were liturgical actions.

So despite the necessity of work on Sundays, the Christians, convinced that any given Sunday might be the day of the Second Coming, found ways to make each Sunday a festival day. In many instances, they would arise before the dawn, before their work began, to celebrate a service of the Word, in which the Scriptures were proclaimed. Then it was off to work, but as the daylight faded and their work obligations released them, they would reconvene for a celebration of the Eucharist, which in the earliest days took place in the context of the main evening meal, though in structure quite recognizable as the ancestor of today's Liturgy of the Eucharist. Later, when a suspecting emperor Trajan outlawed suspicious evening gatherings, and through reform of a eucharistic meal that was becoming too large or extravagant, the Christians combined their Word and Eucharist services into one early-morning celebration, without a main meal. In this combination and simplification of services, the Mass as we know it takes recognizable shape.⁹

SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Scholars have uncovered much about the early liturgies of the Church. Through ancient writings, archeological findings and other evidence, we can get a sense for how the early Christians worshiped. Let us keep in mind that the early Christian Church was not formally structured and existed in the highly diverse cultural setting of the later Roman Empire. While all Christian communities seemed to follow a basic liturgical model of sharing the Scriptures and breaking the bread, there was diversity in the expression of this model. Therefore, instead of painting too detailed a picture, let us discuss seven important characteristics that all early Christian worship seems to have shared.

1. Early Christian worship was primary and identity-shaping. I have already described that apocalyptic mindset of the first Christians that caused them to turn to corporate prayer as the essential way of expressing their faith in what were, they imagined, the last days of time. Dom Gregory Dix says the Christians' worship, based on the actions of Jesus and the teachings of those who knew him personally, animated the nascent Church both as a corporate body and as individual members.¹⁰ Dix points out the persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities was based not on the holding of Christian beliefs but on an individual's participation in the gathered Church's worship. This points up the essential nature of gathering to celebrate the Eucharist to the identity of Christ's early followers; if you did not gather with others for Christian worship, you could not be found guilty of being a Christian. Celebrating the Eucharist was what sustained them and enabled them to live a Christian life. No other form of prayer or Christian activity, including service to the needy, could compare with the Eucharist in its influence or significance to the early Church.

2. Early Christian worship was pluriform. I may be inventing a word with “pluriform,” but to describe liturgy across the early Church, I needed a word that was the opposite of “uniform” without seeming chaotic and scattered. If you were an ancient Christian traveling the world of late antiquity to visit various Christian communities at prayer, you might have felt at home in each. You would also have noted many variations on their expressions of the core rites. Christian worship was, in many places, based upon a simple structure echoing the Jewish synagogue service of the Word and the meal of blessing and thanksgiving that Jesus modeled at the Last Supper. But elements within that simple structure varied from region to region and from community to community. And even the structure itself could vary; Bradshaw and Johnson note that factors such as the means of each community (for example, whether a wealthy person hosted the Eucharist or whether it was a gathering of poor believers) had a significant influence on the shape and content of the gathering itself.¹¹ Even elements such as the Eucharistic Prayer were fluid, unfixed and usually improvised by the president (the one who presided over the community’s prayer; today we call this person the presider), based on an outline of ideas to cover in the prayer. And though most Eucharistic Prayers included Jesus’ words of institution from the Last Supper (“this is my body, this is my blood”), even these are absent from some ancient and yet quite orthodox Eucharistic Prayers, such as the very early east-Syrian Anaphora (Eucharistic Prayer) of Addai and Mari.¹² Eventually, in the course of the development of the Christians’ prayer, excellent turns of phrase or beautiful and evocative images improvised in prayer would be passed to other communities until a canon of Christian prayer begins to form. But in the earliest days, the worship of these apocalyptic communities was varied and not strictly delineated.

This pluriformity was due in no small part to the marked diversity of that group of people that made up the early Christian Church. Jesus was a Jew, and many of his original followers were Jewish; we can observe that the basic structure of Christian prayer was Jewish. But even as early as the New Testament writings we see issues surrounding diversity becoming very important among the Christians. So the prayer of communities of Christians who were mostly Jewish would have been overwhelmingly influenced by Judaism. But in Gentile Christian communities, the same basic structure of prayer would have been influenced by traditions from the Greco-Roman world with its strong sense of ceremonial (ritual movement, planned corporation action).¹³ Where there was a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians, you guessed it—a mix of traditions converged to inform their worship.

3. Early Christian worship was done by all. Earlier I introduced a Greek word, used by St. Paul, to refer to the early Church: the *ekklesia*. This word had staying power and is recognizable as the root of English words like “ecclesial” (relating to church) and “ecclesiology” (the study or theological conception of church). When St. Paul used it to refer to the Christian Church, he was certainly not alluding to church buildings. Rather he was referring to a temple built of people, or as St. Peter puts it, a spiritual house made up of living stones. Therefore, there were no passive spectators in early Christian worship; the celebration of the Eucharist was done by all. Kenneth Stevenson claims hard and fast divisions between ordained and nonordained members of the Christian community are difficult to justify at this stage in Christian history.¹⁴ The reason for having one presider over the liturgy was mostly functional; one person was needed to lead the community’s prayer in the place of Christ. And the reception of the Eucharist was also done by all: adults, even small children. All the baptized received Communion.