



**Holy Spirit Church**

**FULL, CONSCIOUS AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION**

Reflections on the Celebration of Sunday Mass



## FULL, CONSCIOUS AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

This series of eleven articles originally appeared in the parish bulletin between 16 February 2020 and 18 October 2020. They are compiled here in one place to facilitate ongoing reflection on our desire to celebrate the church's liturgy with excellence, aware of the great work of gratitude, worship and intercession on behalf of the world in which we are engaged.

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## *The Introductory Rites*

After the opening comments, our welcome of guests and one another, the Mass begins with the Introductory Rites (the entrance hymn through the opening prayer). The rites are short and meant to gather a congregation into a unity of prayer and purpose. We come from various places, diverse backgrounds, with many different things that may be weighing on our hearts and minds.

The entrance hymn is the beginning of gathering us into a unity. That is why we stand and all of us are meant to participate in the singing; it's not a time to listen to the choir sing. Rather the cantor and choir are leading all of us in a lifting of our voices to God in prayer and praise. If you don't know the words, please pick up the hymnal and join the moment by actively singing.

Following the sign of the cross and greeting, the presider briefly introduces the Mass, leading us to the penitential act when we respond, "*Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.*"

Except for the seasons of Advent and Lent, we sing the *Gloria*, an ancient hymn. Like the entrance hymn, it is to be sung by all of us, following the lead of the cantor and choir. It is not only our duty, but it is our privilege to praise God. Don't just listen; participate.

The Introductory Rites come to a close with the opening prayer, also referred to as a Collect, because it collects our beginning and our attention as we sit and listen to God's Word proclaimed through the Scriptures.

## *The Ambo*

As the Liturgy of the Word begins our attention turns to the ambo. Sometimes it is also referred to as the pulpit. The ambo is one of three prominent focal points during the Mass. It is the place from where the Word of God is proclaimed and preached. The only other thing that happens there is the invocations to pray after we recite the Creed.

Because it is considered a sacred space, where something holy is unfolding, we do not make general announcements from there. Neither the deacons nor anyone else any longer make announcements from the ambo. It is reserved for God's Word and our community's supplications.

The books that we use there are also considered sacred because they are the Word of God. Our movements around the ambo are deliberate. Have you ever noticed that the psalmist will not make a move toward the ambo until the reader has returned to his or her place ... and that the movements to and from the ambo are accentuated by a walk to the very center of the main aisle and a reverent bow to the altar? It's part of the reverence owed to the proclaiming of the Word of God and the place reserved for that purpose.

## *The Gospel Acclamation*

The Liturgy of the Word begins as we sit to listen to the Scripture selections that are given us for the day. The first reading is almost always from the Old Testament. The psalmist leads us in a sung response to that text. The second reading is always from somewhere in the New Testament that is not one of the four gospels.

And then we all stand.

We stand to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ — our most precious, cherished, and holy writings as Christians. That's why we stand; and we stand at attention, almost in a military precision way. The words of the gospel are the most dear to us, the most instructive to us, the most comforting, challenging, significant words we ever use — in church or anywhere else.

Almost all of the time when we stand for the reading of the gospel it is framed by a sung acclamation (an *Alleluia* before and after the proclamation). In our parish we have a custom of not singing anything at those moments during the season of Lent. There are many parts of the Mass that should always be sung; but if circumstances demand it, they may be recited. The stipulation, however, regarding the gospel acclamation is absolute: if it is not sung, it is omitted.

Lent is designed to be a little more somber, a little more subtle. So when it happens that the deacon makes his way to the ambo in silence, think of the penitential nature of the season we have just entered. And hear the silence.

## *The Gospel, the Homily, and the Creed*

The proclamation of the gospel is the apex of the Liturgy of the Word just as the eucharistic prayer is the climax of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Standing for the reading of the gospel shows our reverence for the four New Testament texts that we consider to be the most sacred and most consequential in all the Scriptures. They tell the story of Jesus, after all, and challenge us to learn his teaching and imitate his ways. Our attentiveness is our fullest participation.

The homily is ordinarily based on the Scripture texts of the day. It may also speak to other aspects of the liturgy. A good homily should feed and nourish us in the same way the Body and Blood of Christ nourish us.

Following a brief period of silence, we stand to proclaim together what we believe as a church about our God and his activity in salvation history by reciting the Creed. This is another moment when our active participation is our right and duty.

## *The Universal Prayer*

The Universal Prayer has also been called the Prayers of the Faithful and the General Intercessions. It brings the Liturgy of the Word to a close.

We speak of the Priesthood of all the Faithful in the church; every one of us who is baptized is a priest in the sense that we all have a duty to offer prayers. Offering prayer is an essential obligation of the priesthood — an understanding that goes all the way back to the earliest days of the Old Testament.

The deacon announces what we are asked to pray for; that's not the prayer itself, but only the request that we pray. Not the words the deacon says, but our response to his bidding is our prayer. That's why it is so important that we all respond to the invocations — we are fulfilling our priestly function when we do. Recently we have begun to sing our response; please join all of your brothers and sisters to sing our prayer at the direction of the cantor. We are doing a holy thing when we do.



## *The Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts*

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is the second major part of the Mass and begins after the Universal Prayer, with the deacons and servers preparing the altar. You will see them arrange the linens and chalices on the altar, and place the missal there (that is, the book that contains the texts of the prayers used throughout the liturgy).

While the altar is being prepared, ushers are taking the collection and preparing the offering of our gifts. When everything is ready, the priest moves to the front of the altar and receives the gifts: the bread and wine to be offered at the altar, as well as our monetary offerings that pay our bills so that we can keep our programs strong and our property and buildings open and properly maintained.

This is a reflective and meditative moment of the Mass. As the priest lifts the gifts at the altar with a prayer of blessing, all of us are offering the total gift of our lives which those gifts symbolize. Consciously bring all the stuff of your life and offer it to God as the bread and wine are lifted at the altar: not only your joys and accomplishments, but also your sins, your failings, your confusions and doubts, illness and disease. We hold nothing back from the Lord who gave everything for us; we hold nothing back because we want him to touch every aspect of our lives and everything that is impacting us, the good and the bad. He wants to bless and redeem all of it.

The musical selection at the preparation of the altar and gifts can be either a hymn that the entire congregation is invited to participate in, or it can be a prayer sung only by the cantor and choir. This is one of the moments in the liturgy when our participation can be silent — but still active in the sense that we are listening, reflecting and praying in the quiet of our own hearts, placing the gift of our lives on the altar asking for God's presence in everything that we bring to him and all that is ahead for us in the coming week.

The preparation comes to an end with the priest's invitation to all of us to ask God to accept our gifts, to which we respond, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice ...". We stand for the prayer over the gifts and then the eucharistic prayer begins with the Holy.

## *The Altar*

There are three major pieces of furniture used in every Mass, and they are significantly symbolic: the presider's chair, the ambo, and the altar. Of the three, the altar is the most consequential, even though the priest spends the least amount of time there during a Mass. Even though the priest speaks most of the words of the eucharistic prayer alone, he does so on behalf of all the people.

It is at the altar that we lift our gifts, blessing our good God who is the source of every good thing. The bread and wine offered at the altar represent the totality of our lives; the gift we're offering to God is the whole of our lives: sinful and virtuous, faithful, loving, yet still struggling against sin and every kind of evil within ourselves and within our church and society. It's a deliberate and conscious offering we make to God so that in our prayer at the altar, God may bless it, infuse it with his life and grace, and then he returns our gift to us so that we may be intimately united to him when we consume his precious body and blood.

This dynamic is exactly why it is always preferable that everyone who receives communion during Mass receives the Body and Blood of Christ from bread and wine consecrated at that Mass. We make our offering, God receives it, and then returns it to us, feeding us with his own life.

Our conscious participation is about our attentiveness to this dynamic of offering and receiving; it is about our attentiveness to the spoken prayer as it unfolds; and it is about singing the acclamations as full-throated shouts of joy to God: the *Holy*, the *Memorial Acclamation*, and the *Great Amen* that brings the eucharistic prayer to its end.

This moment of prayer is not the time to close our eyes or bury our heads in our hands. This is the moment to be attentive and aware of all those around me who are offering their life's blessings and challenges at the same time as me.

The time for lowering our heads and closing our eyes comes after we've received the eucharist and the hymn gives way to silence.

## *The Altar*

### *Part 2*

This series of articles has been focusing on one specific quality of celebrating liturgy in an excellent way. That quality is the full, conscious and active participation of every one of us present, whether in person or virtually. It is the guiding principle given us by the Second Vatican Council. The words of the highest authority in the Catholic church are clear and unambiguous: “in the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else..”

Liturgy in the Catholic church is about community, which is why our best participation is so important. There is no moment in the Mass about creating a private space for me to be in communion with God alone - I am required to be in communion with all my brothers and sisters, and God. The time for a private moment of prayer in communion with God and my gathered brothers and sisters comes during periods of silence in the liturgy: at the introduction to the penitential act, between the reading of the Scriptures, after the homily, and during the silence following the communion rite. These times are never separated from our obligation to be aware of, and in communion with, each other.

The altar is the central symbol of our Sunday Mass. What happens there demands our fullest attention and participation. A presider who fulfills his responsibility well will create an atmosphere in which we know that we are a community gathered as one, in God’s name, around his altar.

## *The Communion Rite*

After singing a full-throated and heartfelt *Amen* – the *Great Amen* is what we call it – the eucharistic prayer ends and we are back on our feet to pray the Lord's Prayer, praying to Jesus' father, and ours, in the very words he gave us to speak. This is the beginning of our preparation to receive the Lord's gift of himself – given back to us through the gifts we just offered to him. This is a precious prayer for us and we use it every day. At Sunday Mass we must pray these words together and wholeheartedly, whether they are recited or sung. That's our responsibility.

The Sign of Peace is very muted these days, but still remains an important part of our preparation to receive communion, expressing out intention to live the peace that is God's gift. The Lamb of God is a litany that brings us to immediate preparation to receive the eucharist.

Then as we come forward to receive communion, we are receiving a gift from God, transformed for us from the gift we just offered to him. We receive back from the hands of the Lord the offering of our lives, but now the Lord has filled our gift with his life and grace and mercy. This is why it has always been preferable that we receive communion from the bread and wine that has been consecrated at that Mass.

Although we are not permitted to offer the Blood of Christ for consumption during this pandemic, it remains a vital part of what Jesus gave us at the Last Supper: bread that gives life, and wine that symbolizes life to its fullest. We have a God who not only wants us to live, but he wants us to live life fully and happily.

When the time comes that it is permissible, please join us in savoring the fullness of the gift that our God gives so generously -- his very life: body *and* blood.

## *The Communion Rite*

### *Part 2*

When Bishop Nelson was here, he instituted the uniform practice across the entire diocese that all of us should remain standing when we return to our place after receiving communion until everyone has received the eucharist and the communion hymn has come to an end. This is because receiving communion is not a private moment of intimacy just between me and the Lord Jesus; on the contrary, it is the most communal part of the entire Mass – a time of deepest communion between me, my Lord, and all of my brothers and sisters. Participating in the singing of the communion hymn is the responsibility of all of us. The hymn fosters a sense of unity among us, and remaining standing allows us to include each other in our prayers as we watch people walk by.

Once everyone has received communion and the hymn has ended – that is the appropriate and perfect time to bow our heads, close our eyes, sit or kneel, and focus our hearts on a private communion with our Lord.

From time to time the cantor or choir may sing a reflection hymn. When this happens, our conscious participation is to pay attention, keeping our hearts open to the Lord's activity in us as we prepare to leave church and go back to our week's responsibilities.

This time of private prayer ends when the priest stands and invites us all, "Let us pray." The prayer after communion is followed by any necessary announcements, and then the recessional hymn sends us on our way. It is a hymn meant for all of us to sing together, thanking God for this time together and accepting his commission that we go and live his gospel throughout what lies before us during the next several days. "Go in peace."

## *Summary and Conclusions*

This series of articles hardly exhausts all that there is to say about our celebration of the Sunday liturgy. The beauty of all things godly, spiritual and liturgical is that we can never say everything that there is to say; our understanding will never be complete; we can never allow ourselves to stop learning, exploring and experiencing. In the end, the liturgy is something to be engaged and experienced, not learned or taught.

These articles have considered Sunday Mass through the prism of the “full, conscious and active participation” that the church identified as its first aim – the aim “to be considered before all else” – in the reform and renewal of the liturgy which began on the First Sunday of Advent in 1964.

There is nothing that can propel a presiding celebrant in leading this prayer greater than this kind of participation by the congregation when responding to the prayers and singing. The most important things for the entire congregation to sing fully, in a prioritized order are:

1. the acclamations surrounding the eucharistic prayer (*Holy, Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen*),
2. The gospel acclamation,
3. The refrain of the responsorial psalm,
4. The entrance processional hymn
5. The communion processional hymn

There are many other sung parts, of course, and our participation in them is important. But the above stand out as particularly important and necessary for all of us to participate in.

These articles are written with the hope that they will inspire our further exploration of the richness of Sunday liturgy and move us into an appreciation of our right and duty to participate fully, consciously and actively, so that we “may, in company with all God’s people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love...” (*Ephesians 3:18*).