

The Mass Explained

CORMAC BURKE



Introduction

To judge the "quality" of the Christian life of a community is always a difficult task, and perhaps a foolhardy one. There are so many factors that should be taken into account. And the most important of them are hidden!

Nevertheless, if the Holy Mass is the central act of our Catholic life, then Mass-going must surely remain one of the most indicative of these factors. With good reason therefore we consider the number of people coming to Mass, not only on Sundays but also very specially on weekdays. With even better reason we try to assess the "quality" of their participation in the Mass; their understanding of its nature and their application to their own lives of what it should mean for them. And we often think of the ways in which we can help them.

This is where our catechists on the Mass must come in: a constant catechesis, with big groups and small groups, with Sundays congregations and very particularly with the weekday ones; a constant and simple catechesis that is not afraid to drive home the basic points by dint of repetition.

The following commentaries — one for each day of the month — were first prepared for school use, with the idea of repeating them once every two or three months. They can easily be adapted for use on a different basis. The person-to-person style is no doubt more suited to the spoken word or to be put down in writing, but it seemed preferable not to change it.

Christ's action

The Holy Mass is the holiest thing we have here on earth. Why? Because it is the action of Christ. The main thing in the Mass is not what is read from the Holy Scriptures, even though this is the word of God and should be listened to as such. The main thing in the Mass is not what the priest preaches in his sermon nor what the people do or sing. The main thing is what Christ does. And what does Christ do in the Holy Mass? He offers himself for us, as he offered himself on the Cross. He sacrifices himself for us. That is why we say that the Mass is the same Sacrifice as that of the Cross renewed in an unbloody manner on the altar. On the altar just on the Cross, Christ offers his body and blood for us. The difference is that on the Cross his body and blood were visible to the eyes of those who were present, while in the Mass they are hidden under the appearances of bread and wine. But they are really present. This is the great fact. In each Mass, Christ is really present and renews the Sacrifice of the Cross.

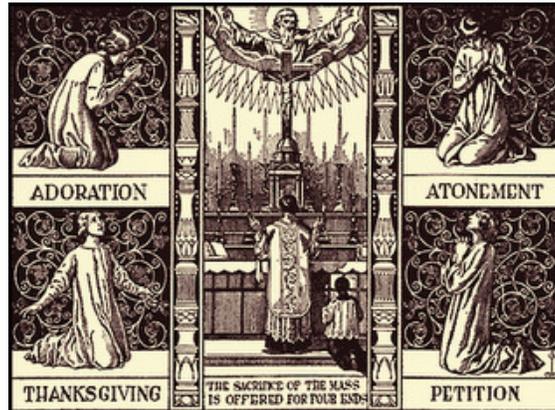
Love for the Mass

"A man who fails to love the Mass fails to love Christ."¹ To love the Mass is a guarantee for salvation. But to love the Mass does not mean just being present and no more. It means to be present with faith and devotion. It means to take part in the Mass, realizing what it is: the Sacrifice of the Cross renewed on the altar; and realizing that when we go to Mass, we go, as it were, to Calvary. And that we should be present there, like our Blessed Lady beside the Cross, in loving contemplation of Christ who offers himself lovingly for each one of us.

Faith

The holy Eucharist is the "mystery of faith." Without faith, all you would see is bread and wine being offered, no more. Without faith, the most you could see in this is a gesture, a symbol, nothing more. With faith you know that at the moment of the Consecration — which is when the priest says, "This is my body," "This is the cup of my blood" — the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ who is then really present as God and as Man sacrificing himself for us on the altar as he sacrificed himself on the cross. If you come to Mass without faith, or with little faith you will easily get distracted and perhaps even bored. What a sad thing to get bored with Christ's sacrifice! Would we have been bored if we had been present at Calvary? If we hadn't faith, perhaps we would. Or at least we would have completely failed to understand what the death of that Man nailed to the cross really meant. You will only begin to understand the greatness of the Mass if you have faith. Stir up your faith. And then you will always be amazed at the Mass, you will realize that it is the greatest thing we possess here on earth.

The purposes of the Mass



What else should you do, besides having a lot of faith, if you want to attend Holy Mass well? You should identify yourself with Christ. You should remember the Scriptures and have "the same mind" "that he had on the cross (cf. Phil 2:5). The same mind which means the same purposes. What purposes did Jesus have on the cross? What was he concerned about? We can sum up his ends or purposes as four: to give glory to God the Father; to thank him; to make up for the sins of men; and to ask him for graces for us. If each time you go to Mass, you try to live at least one of these four purposes, you will attend Holy Mass well.

The first purpose: adoration

God is our Creator. He is the Lord of the whole world. We depend on him for everything. He is infinite, eternal, all-powerful. His infinite greatness and goodness ought to fill us with amazement and enthusiasm. When people get enthused about God, they want to praise him, they want to adore him. Jesus Christ, with his humanity, gave perfect glory to God the Father from the cross, and he continues to do so from the altar. If you unite yourself to him, you will be offering a perfect sacrifice of adoration and praise. Pay special attention to the *Gloria* and the *Sanctus*.

The second purpose: to give thanks

God is infinitely good. And all the good things we have, have come from him: life, family, sanctifying grace, faith, the sacraments, the gift of his Mother... And so many other natural and supernatural gifts. It is good to give thanks. The person who is too proud to say "Thank You" is not only ungrateful but is bound to end up being unhappy. Unite yourself to our Lord in the Mass, giving thanks, and you will see how you also become more optimistic as a result, because you will become more and more convinced of the goodness of God.

The third purpose: to make up for our sins

Jesus is perfect God and perfect Man. He is all-holy. Therefore he has not and could not have been guilty of any sin. But, as the Holy Scriptures says, he took our sins on himself and made up for them. He did penance for us by dying on the cross. If we want to take part properly in the Holy Mass, we must be sorry for our sins. The person who is not sorry for his sins will never understand or love the Mass, nor will he ever really take part in it. But the person who comes to Mass with real sorrow for his sins, will draw from it great strength to fight against temptations and to realize that, despite his weaknesses, God loves him very much.

The penitential act — the "I confess" — that we all say together at the start of the Mass does not pardon mortal sins. Forgiveness of mortal sins has to be obtained in the sacrament of penance. It is also important to remember that a person who has committed a mortal sin cannot go to communion unless he goes to confession beforehand. But the penitential act, if it is said well, certainly helps to obtain pardon for present venial sins as well as to stir up new sorrow for past sins that have already been forgiven. In this way it helps us to purify ourselves and so to take better part in the Holy Mass.

The fourth purpose: petition

Our God is a merciful and a very generous God. He longs to give. He wants to give us what is absolutely the best, what is the greatest gift imaginable: eternal life and all the help we need to make it ours. God wants to give. But he also wants to be asked: "Ask and you shall receive." That is why we ask with a prayer for petition. However, it is wise, when asking, to be able to back up our petition with some proof of special merit on our part. This is where we seem to run into a big difficulty. For when we look at ourselves, we see ourselves so full of defects and so lacking in merits that there seems to be no reason why God should ever heed our petitions. That is why we look to the merits of Christ, and to those of our Lady and the saints. That is why, if we are sensible, we unite our prayer to the prayer of Christ.

Christ's prayer is always effective because it is simply impossible that God the Father should not listen to the prayer of his beloved Son. Jesus prayed for us on the cross. He continues praying for us on the altar. When we pray in the Holy Mass, therefore, and unite our prayers to that of Jesus, we can be sure that our requests will be heard by God the Father.

Readings

Holy Scripture is God's word. God speaks to us in the inspired books, so that we can know what we have to believe and what we have to do, in order to get to heaven. After each reading we say, "Thanks be to God." Why do we say this? Because it is a wonderful thing that God speaks to us, that he addresses his words to us in these holy books, pointing out to us the way to heaven. It is another marvelous proof of his love for us. That is why we thank him.

Gospel

The Gospel tell us of the life of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. They tell us of the things he did and the words he spoke during his life here on earth. We stand — at attention, as it were — in order to listen to the Gospel. This should be a sign to others and a reminder to ourselves that we are ready and determined to put into practice what we are listening to. You will have noticed how, just before the priest begins to read the Gospel, he turns towards the altar or the tabernacle, bows down and prays. What he is doing is to ask God for grace to be able to proclaim the good news of the Gospel well. At that moment you too would do well to ask for grace to be able to listen to the Gospel joyfully, to understand it and to put it into practice.

Creed

This is said on Sundays and the bigger feasts. We declare our faith. Do we really believe in the things we say in the Creed? Of course! But do we realize how big these things are? We believe in God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is One and Three, who created us, who redeemed us by means of his Son, Jesus Christ, who sanctifies us, giving us a share in his own life — by means of grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit and that of the holy Church — who forgives us always (always provided we are sorry and ask for his pardon), and who is determined to bring us to heaven. There are some people who live in a closed world, as if they were inside a tunnel.²

Faith brings us out of the tunnel and let us live in the wonderful world of God. To declare our faith, as we do in the Creed, is something that should fill its with wonder, thanks and joy.

Presentation of the gifts

We have ended the liturgy of the word. Now we start the eucharistic liturgy in which the main actions of the Mass take place. The eucharistic liturgy is made up of three main parts: the presentation of the gifts, the eucharistic prayer or Canon (with the consecration), and the communion. In the presentation of the gifts (or the offertory) the priest (and we with him) offers the hosts — some small particles of unleavened bread — and small quantity of wine. What he offers is really very little. We could say that it has practically no value. But, *it should represent us*. If you want to learn to take proper part in the Holy Mass, it is important that you learn to offer yourself and to offer all that is yours in this moment of the Mass.³ Take your work, your studies, your needs, your struggle, and even your weaknesses. Take all of that and put it on the paten beside the hosts, those small pieces of bread. Put it on the chalice with the wine.

Jesus Christ is going to come to this altar within a few minutes. There are many ways in which he could have chosen to come. But he has wished to come by marvelously turning the bread and the wine into his own body and blood. He has wished to come by means of transubstantiation, by which something that we offer him, something that is ours, is changed into his body and blood, while of the bread and wine only the appearances remain. The bread and the wine are our gifts, our offering to God. They will

be your gift and your offering if you make them yours, if you put yourself there, on the paten with the bread, in the chalice with the wine. If you let yourself get distracted at the moment when the priest is offering the gifts, then the bread and the wine will be other people's gifts, something that other people offer to God. But they won't be your gifts, because you have not offered them, you have not offered yourself with them. Now do you see how important it is not to get distracted at the moment of the offertory?

Presentation of the gifts

We have seen how in the presentation of the gifts, we offer to God a little bread and wine. We have seen too that these offerings ought to represent us. In themselves they are things of little value, but our affection accompanies them. Now think of what is going to happen to these gifts of ours. At the moment of the consecration, God is going to change them into something divine: into himself. From bread and wine they become the body and blood of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man! Up to the moment of the consecration our offering to God has practically no value. From the moment on, it has infinite value! Doesn't this help you see the importance of offering yourself with the bread and the wine so that they represent your day, your life? If you do this you are participating in the Mass, and God will gradually do with your life what he does with the bread and wine. He will gradually turn your life — your ordinary everyday life — into something with divine value in his eyes. Your life — your work, your rest, your sports, your friendships — if you associate it closely to the Holy Mass, will be a sanctified life, which means sanctified work, sanctified rest, sanctified sports, sanctified friendships. Unite yourself well to the Holy Mass.

Orate, fratres

We have spoken of how we ought to offer ourselves on the paten with the bread, and in the chalice with the wine. You have probably noticed how the priest, before he offers the chalice, adds a few drops of water to the wine, the wine that will soon be turned into the blood of our Lord. These drops of water — which are dissolved in the wine and therefore also turn into the Blood of Christ — represent us and all that we offer to God with Christ. Consider what happens next. After offering the bread and wine, the priest turns to the people and invites them to pray "so that our sacrifice," he says — my sacrifice and yours — "may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty," Don't pass over this too lightly: the sacrifice of the Mass is Christ's action, Christ's sacrifice. But it is also the sacrifice of the priest and of the people. It is your sacrifice — if you have made it yours, if you have really put some part of yourself into this sacrifice.

Sanctus

The Preface introduces the Canon which is the central and most solemn part of the Holy Mass. At the end of the Preface we say the Sanctus: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God..." It is like a song or a shout of enthusiasm. Let us think for a moment what our God is like. He is all powerful (he can do anything). He is infinite Love (he loves us as no one else could

ever love us). He is all goodness and truth and greatness (he became Man out of love for us; he died on the cross to redeem us; and then he overcame death by rising again).

All of this should fill us with gratitude and joy. And then, like the saints and the angels in heaven, we will grow really enthusiastic about our God, we will want to praise him, and we will repeat the "Holy, holy, holy" with faith and fervor.

Consecration

The most solemn moment of the Holy Mass is the consecration. Up to that moment what is on the altar is bread and wine. From the moment when the priest pronounces the words of the consecration" — This is my body"; "This is the cup of my blood" — what is in the altar is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Of the bread and wine nothing remains except the appearances. But, under those appearances, God is really present. All of this is done by the power of God. Jesus Christ is God become Man and he can do anything. He can even change a little bread and wine into his own body and blood so that it can be our offering and sacrifice: and also, if we are fit to receive him, so that it can be our food.

The priest raises the host and the chalice. And we adore Appearances will not deceive us if we have faith. With the eyes of our body we only see bread. But with the eyes of faith — which is how the Christian soul sees — we see and recognize our Lord himself. Let us express our faith. You remember those words of Saint Thomas, "My Lord and my God." Many people repeat them quietly to themselves at the moment of the elevation. Thomas wished to see the glorious Body of the risen Jesus. Then he proclaimed his divinity. Our Lord said to him, "Thomas, you believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe." Let us proclaim our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the host, relying for proof on his infallible word.

Consecration — Communion

This is the moment of the Mass when we have to be most awake, putting heart and soul into many acts of faith and love and adoration. Because Christ is at last on the altar. There is no longer any bread or wine. By the miraculous process of transubstantiation all of it has been changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, God become Man. Our Lord is really present with his humanity and his divinity, offering himself for us on the altar just as he offered himself for us on the cross.

We are on Calvary. This is the "composition of place" that we should make in these moments. Christ is offering himself for us. We too should want to be beside him, like our Lady and Saint John who were beside him and kept him company on Calvary. Let us ask them to help us not to get distracted, to be present with faith, to realize what Jesus is doing as he offers himself on the altar for the whole humanity — to adore him, to thank him.

The Mass is never a private action. Even if very few people or only a single person accompanies the priest, the whole Church is present. "Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice. In it the work of our redemption continues to be carried out. For this reason, priests are strongly urged to celebrate Mass every day, for

even if the faithful are unable to be present, it is an act of Christ and the Church.¹⁴ Let us be conscious of this presence of the whole Church which, of course, also includes the angels and the saints. They are present and adoring from the moment of the consecration. If we ask them, they will help us too, to be present in a spirit of reverence and adoration.

The Our Father

The Eucharistic Prayer or Canon is the central part of the Mass. Now the moment for communion is approaching. As we end the Canon we begin our more immediate preparation for communion. And first of all we say the prayer that our Lord himself taught his disciples: "Taught by him, we dare to call God our Father — he is the Almighty who created heaven and earth, and he is a loving Father who waits for us to come back to him again and again, as the story of the prodigal son repeats itself in our lives."¹⁵ The Our Father contains seven petitions. We would do well to meditate on each one of them as they cover all of our most important needs.

Preparation for Communion

"This is the Lamb of God... Lord, I am not worthy.. We are going to receive our Lord. On this earth, when we receive an important person, we bring out the best — lights, music, formal dress. How should we prepare to receive Christ into our soul? Have we ever thought about how we would behave if we could only receive him once in a lifetime?"¹⁶ We are not worthy to have him enter even once into our house, into our poor soul. Yet he is so eager to enter there very often. What we can and ought to do is to ensure that however poor the house of our soul is, it is clean. We cannot receive our Lord with a dirty soul, with a soul dirtied by sin. If we ever stain ourselves with a serious sin, then we have to get cleaned in the sacrament of penance before going to communion. We are not worthy to receive our Lord. But we must never receive him unworthily with a mortal sin on our soul that has not been confessed. It would be like the kiss of Judas. It would mean betraying Christ, striking him, crucifying him all over again.

Communion

"Happy are those who are called to his supper." "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man, you will not have life in you." "Anyone who eats this bread will live forever..." We come to Mass because we have felt ourselves invited to accompany our Lord in his sacrifice — while he offers himself for us — and to offer ourselves with him. We come to Holy Mass, therefore, to take part in the sacrifice of Christ. When the moment of communion comes, we feel that our Lord continues to invite us. Now he is calling us to his supper where he offers himself to us to be the food of our souls. How hungry we should be to receive him!

The soul needs its nourishment even much more than the body. But we should not forget that while the appetite of the body is generally spontaneous (three or four times a day we *feel* like eating), the appetite of the soul is rather *reflexive* and *voluntary*: it is a

consequence of faith. Stir up your faith in him who is hidden beneath the appearances of bread: "Lord, I recognize you." Stir up your faith in his promises: "Anyone who eats this bread will live forever." And your hunger for communion will increase from day to day.

We should be so eager to receive him! Holy Communion is the greatest gift we could be offered. And yet some people are not interested! They could go to communion frequently; but they don't. And there are others who don't go to communion because their weaknesses get the better of them. But why don't they go to confession first, and then to communion? And then they will get *strength*, precisely to resist those weaknesses! But since God not only knows this but loves us, he has given us a source of special strength, of divine strength, in the sacrament. How eager we ought to be to receive them, especially those two which we can receive often, confession and communion.

We should put so much love into how we receive him! Always with faith, and always with love. If you really have faith, if you realize what it is you receive, you will receive him with love, just as it is with love that he comes to you. He comes to you with love, and you *ought* to receive him with love. There is no *obligation* to go to communion frequently. But if you do go to communion, then there is an obligation to receive him with love and affection. It would be such a lack of reverence to receive our Lord in a routine way, without trying to make many acts of faith and of love.

Holy Mass: self-giving

In the Mass, Christ offers himself for us. And in Holy Communion he offers himself to us. Think what this offering costs our Lord — his whole passion! The Mass asks us also for correspondence and self-giving. If we attend Mass with faith, it will be easier for us to give ourselves to God each day trying to fulfill his commandments with love. And it will also be easier for us to give ourselves generously to other people, in a constant effort to love them, to understand them, to make their lives happier.

Opening prayer, prayer over the gifts, prayer after communion

In the Holy Mass we are praying constantly with Jesus and through Jesus. Remember, for instance, the prayer that we say before the readings, and those that come after the offertory and the communion. We ask for different things. But what matters most is that we always ask "through Jesus Christ our Lord." It has been said that the only prayer which reaches heaven with full effect is that of Jesus. Therefore when we pray through him in the Mass, we can be sure that our prayers reach God the Father and that he listens to them.

Mass: presence of God

There are so many other small details in the Mass that we can learn from. One is the fact that time and again throughout the Mass the priest says to the people — he wishes them — "the Lord be with you," and the people return him the same wish. Could we wish someone anything better? The Lord is going to be with us during the whole of the Mass,

and we should try to be with him. And then he will also be more with us — and we more with him during the rest of the day.

Sorrow for one's sin

The Mass is a sacrifice offered for the forgiveness of sins. We would not have proper dispositions for taking part in the Mass if we were not aware of our sins and *sorry for* them. That is why, as soon as the Mass has begun, the priest invites each one of us to call our sins to mind. And all of us pray together, acknowledging that we have sinned through our own fault in our thoughts and words, in what we have done and failed to do. If you are not sorry for your sins you will never attend Mass well. Think at the moment therefore about your sins and your acts of selfishness, and ask Blessed Mary ever Virgin, and all the angels and saints, to pray for you and help you to be very sorry for those faults of yours which, even if they are not very grave, nevertheless disfigure the soul.

Thanksgiving

Christ offers himself for us in the Holy Mass, and he offers himself to us in Holy Communion. To be present at Mass, and receive Holy Communion, is the greatest thing we can do here on earth. Here, on the altar, we receive the greatest benefits that God gives us on earth. Once Mass has ended it is only logical that we remain for a few minutes giving thanks to our Lord. To leave without giving thanks would be a sign of little consideration or little faith. "The fact that the sacred function... has come to an end, does not dispense him who has communicated from making his thanksgiving. On the contrary it is most fitting that after he has received Holy Communion and after the Mass is over he should collect his thoughts and, in close union with his Divine Master, pass such time as circumstances allow in devout and salutary conversation with him."⁷

Those moments, when one has received communion and the Mass has just ended, are the best moments to ask graces and favors from our Lord. He is so eager to give, but at the same time he wants us to ask. "Ask and you shall receive." Can there be any better moment for asking than when we are united with him, when he is inside us, brought there by his immense love towards each one of us? Don't waste those moments. Use them to pray for many things, for yourself, for your loved ones, for the Church, for the Pope, for souls everywhere, for the whole world...

Endnotes

1. J. M. Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 92.
2. J. M. Escriva, *The Way*, no. 575.
3. Cf. Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 5; *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 11 and 34.
4. Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 13.
5. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 91.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, no. 130.

Cormac Burke is a native of Sligo, Ireland. He is a Master of Arts in Modern Languages, Law, and a doctorate in Canon Law. He has taught at Trinity College, Dublin and at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. His work as a priest has been carried on mainly in England, the United States, Kenya, and Rome. The above article is an excerpt from The Mass Explained (Sinag-Tala Publishers, 1981).