

# WHAT THE MASS MEANS



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MASS MEANS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
RITES OF THE LATIN MASS

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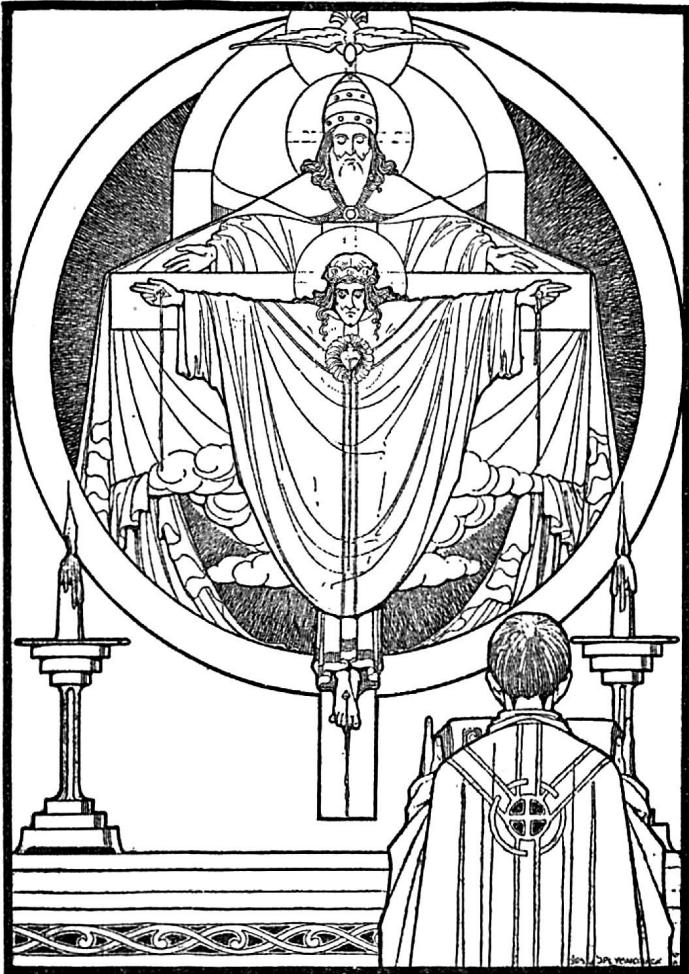
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*“Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament,  
Mother and Model of Adorers,  
pray for us who have recourse to thee.”*



*“Hear, O Lord Jesus Christ, the prayers of Thy servants and have mercy on us: who with the Father and Holy Ghost lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.”*

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# INTRODUCTION

## GREATEST ACT OF WORSHIP

*THE MASS* is our greatest act of worship. It is our sacrifice. Its importance comes from the fact that it is a renewal and a continuation of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross on the hill of Calvary. We have heard many times that the Mass is our most influential prayer; that it is a most abundant source of benefit to both the living and the dead. In the Mass, we adore the Highest Lord and also make atonement for having offended Him through sin.

We are certainly interested in this highest act of Religion! It means so much to us. To help us to understand and appreciate the Mass, the Church has wisely ornamented it with what we call ceremonies and symbols. These are various actions, gestures and movements which tell a story. How often we have heard the expression, "actions speak louder than words"! Everything we see and hear during the Divine Sacrifice means something and is a key part in telling the story of a reality that transcends all things human.

## THE MASS, AN EDUCATOR

In teaching children, and even adults, the good teacher frequently tells stories and draws pictures and illustrations and diagrams. The listeners are better able to understand when the teacher uses this method. The Church uses the picture

method, or the black-board method when it uses ceremonies and symbols. You remember in St. Mark's gospel (7:34) the story of Our Lord's miraculous cure of one deaf and dumb. "And He [Christ] put his fingers into His ears, and spitting, he touched his tongue: and looking up to heaven he groaned, and said to him: *Ephpheta*, which is, Be thou opened." We know the Savior could just as easily have cured this unfortunate one had He not used all this ceremonial in the action. But Jesus used this round-about way to teach a lesson through the groan, the spittle, the touching of the tongue. So does the Church teach in its use of all these externals in the Mass.

These signs and actions also help us to pray better. Is it not easier to pray when we strike our breast, or when we kneel, or when we bow? These actions also express our deep and fervent sorrow and littleness. We know pictures and statues help us keep our easily-distracted mind fixed on religious ideas. Man is made up not only of body and senses but also of soul and spirit. The body with its senses helps the soul and mind pray and worship better. Man needs signs and symbols and ceremonies to impress him; to touch his heart; to fix his wandering thoughts—to teach him.

Speaking of the impressive ceremonies of the Mass, the Council of Trent declares, "Since by reason of his nature man is so constituted that without exterior aid he can not easily rise to the contemplation of divine things, the Church, as a devoted mother, has therefore introduced into her liturgy certain usages, as, for example, that some portions of the Mass should be recited in a low tone, others in a loud tone of voice. In like manner, certain ceremonies, for instance the blessings, the use of lights, incense, vestments and many things of that nature, she employs by Apostolic custom and tradition, in

order both to manifest thereby the majesty of the great sacrifice, as well as to animate the minds of the faithful by these visible signs of religion and piety, to the consideration of the sublime mysteries hidden within this sacrifice" (Sess. 22, c. 5.).

The diamond is a beautiful gem. In order to bring out its beauty, a jeweler mounts it in a pin, or a ring. The ceremonies and prayers of the Mass, we may say, are like the mounting and setting to the diamond—they bring out the beauty of the Sacrifice. Sacrifice, since it is the highest act in religion, is most beautiful in itself. In order that we may understand and appreciate this beauty, it is given to us mounted in a gorgeous ceremonial.

Father Faber, a convert and one who has written well on the Blessed Sacrament, writes, "[The Mass] is the most beautiful thing this side of heaven . . . it came forth out of the grand mind of the Church and lifted us out of earth and out of self."

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Why is the Mass our greatest act of worship?
2. What is a sacrifice? What is worship?
3. What is meant by adoration? By atonement?
4. Explain the purpose and use of ceremonies.
5. Name some ceremonies and symbols.



## PREPARATION

### PRAYERS AT THE FOOT OF THE ALTAR

HAVING ARRANGED the chalice for Mass and opened the Missal, the priest descends to the foot of the altar. There he makes the Sign of the Cross with the usual words. It is certainly fitting and wise that the priest and people should begin this Sacrifice with the Sign of the Cross; for the Mass is Christ's redeeming death on the cross continued and re-presented. The Mass brings us back to the cross on Calvary. The Sign of the Cross is also a synopsis, a summary of our faith. We begin the Mass with a short act of faith in the Trinity and in the Redemption.

#### *Written in Exile*

There follows the 42nd Psalm. This inspired poem was written by King David when he was in exile, fleeing from his rebellious son, Absalom. The antiphon is said first, "I will go unto the altar of God. Unto God Who giveth joy to my youth." The antiphon strikes the key-note of the psalm; it gives the main idea of the poem.

David is in exile. He regrets immensely he is not able to go to the temple and take part in the worship. He longs and yearns to pray and sacrifice in Jerusalem. He begs God to be his judge—a just judge. God knows David is innocent; that his enemies led by the ungrateful Absalom, judge him wrongly. David feels God allows this present revolt as a

punishment for his sins. He begs God to send him help, light and truth, that he may bear his misery humbly. The exiled king hopes in his Creator and promises on his return to the holy city of Jerusalem, to sing the praises of the Lord to the accompaniment of his harp. In the temple he will find joy and gladness. When he offers his sacrifice at the altar, his heart will bound with the joy which was his in youth when he knew no sorrow.

### *Beautiful Preparation*

Isn't this a beautiful preparation for our Mass? We repeat with the priest this psalm of David. We beg God humbly and contritely to hear our prayers in our extreme need. We, like David, are exiles in this valley of tears. We are troubled with enemies of soul and body. We need strength and light and truth so very badly. God will judge us and we beg Him to be favorable to us. He knows how hard we try to serve Him. Our present sorrows will pass; He will dry the tears from our eyes. We are anxious to offer Him this sacrifice of the Mass. We are happy that we can obtain forgiveness and help at the altar. Our sadness over our helplessness and loneliness turns to thrilling joy as we anticipate the wealth of this Sacrifice of the Mass. Herein we find joy, the only real, lasting and true joy—the joy of youth, the joy of a spiritual new life, in the grace and friendship of God.

Then is said the “Glory be to the Father, etc.” We close this matchless prayer-psalm with a gladsome cry of praise and thanks to each person of the Trinity. During the prayer we bow, to express our reverence and humility before the triune God.

### *Omitted at Requiems*

Since this 42nd psalm and the “Glory be to the Father” are joyful prayers, they are omitted at Requiem Masses and Masses of Passion-week. At these Masses we are expected to be mourning for the departed and for the suffering Savior.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Why do we begin the Mass with a Sign of the Cross?
2. Can you make this sign correctly?
3. Who was King David? What is a psalm? An antiphon? (Consult the Catholic Encyclopedia or a good dictionary).
4. Give the meaning of Psalm 42 verse by verse. (To be found in the Old Testament).
5. Why is this psalm such a beautiful preparation for Mass?

### THE CONFITEOR

Realizing that only he who is “innocent in hands, and clean of heart” may “go up to the mountain of the Lord, and stand in His holy place” (Psalm 23:3), the priest makes a public acknowledgment of his transgressions in the *Confiteor*. Before this general confession, he blesses himself with the strengthening words, “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The priest fears, as it were, to begin this august mystery of the Mass in which he is to speak for Christ. Appreciating somewhat his responsibility, he asks God for help and strength. To call on the name of one, means to call on that person; “name” means person, individual. He makes the Sign of the Cross, for through the cross we have the saving help of the Savior. “I have lifted up my eyes to the mountains, from whence help shall come to me” (Psalm 120:1).

Then follows the *Confiteor* which means, "I confess." The priest confesses first to Almighty God whom we have offended above all. Then, we confess our guilt to the Blessed Virgin. We have not directly offended her, but by offending the Son, we have also indirectly offended her. Well may we be ashamed before her who shared not our offenses yet suffered because of them in the passion of her Son.

Then Michael, the Archangel, is mentioned. Michael is the valiant and faithful angel warrior who hurled the rebellious angels into hell. To him we confess—to him who is tried and true. Certainly, we have failed where he remained loyal and steadfast. Next, an acknowledgment of sin is made to St. John the Baptist, the precursor of the Lord in the preaching of penance for the remission of sins. Then comes "the holy apostles Peter and Paul and all the saints." All these have overcome the temptations to which we have surrendered; they have been victorious through the Blood of the Lamb of God—that life-giving Blood which we, in our sins, have thrown back to Heaven in refusal. By our sins, we have grieved all these saints; we have offended and insulted them by our wrong-doings, for we cast aside that for which they died.

We confess our guilt also to all the living, "to you brethren." Through this confession we wish to repair our bad example, we wish to correct the scandal we have caused. Sin is the greatest social evil. Sin begets sin; sin creates disharmony. Then striking his breast, the priest sadly says, "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." In this action is eloquent symbolism—the striking of the breast expresses deep regret, for the heart was considered as a cause of undue affection for sin and so deserves to be chastised and blamed. The three-fold striking expresses symbolically the intense, the very



sincere regret and contrition. The deep inclination of the body and the eyes cast to earth and the hands folded all dramatically bespeak the guilty priest's misery and shame before the good and forgiving Lord. There is the minister before the altar as an ungrateful servant, his back loaded with heavy offenses, his hands tied as God's runaway prisoner, his eyes cast to the floor as one guilty and ashamed to face the truth.

The *Confiteor* recalls the sixteenth stanza of the *Dies Irae* said at Requiems, "Kneeling and prostrate I pray, with a heart contrite as though crushed to ashes; care Thou for me at my last hour." "A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit. A contrite and humble heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 50).

There follows now the second part of the *Confiteor*, or the public confession of sins in general. Now we beg the saints invoked in the first half to pray for us. We pray the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of divine grace, the Mother of mercy, the refuge of sinners, our life, our sweetness and our hope, to win God's forgiveness for us. We likewise beg Saint Michael, our safeguard against the devil, to obtain mercy for us; we beg St. John the Baptist, saints Peter and Paul and all the saints to ask the Lord God for us. We ask the friends of the King to obtain for us miserable traitors, His mercy and forgiveness. Humbly, we beg the people assembled to pray also for us, that we may in a worthy and becoming manner celebrate this Mystery.

The people, now through the altar boy, make their public avowal of sin, using the words which the priest used with one exception. Where the priest said, "You brethren," the people say, "You, Father."

It is hardly necessary to mention the value of the *Confiteor*. This should be now evident to all who considered it seriously as a preparation for Mass. And still, how often the people

neglect either to say it, or to say it humbly and contritely? The altar-boys say it aloud for the congregation and the congregation should say it privately with great compunction of heart, bowing and striking their breasts. The *Confiteor* is a sacramental, and, as you know, sacramentals remit venial sins on account of the sorrow, love, faith, good resolutions, and other good thoughts, words, deeds, and desires which they arouse and evoke.

The people and priest pray for each other in the words:

“May the Almighty God have mercy upon you, and bring you to life everlasting.”

Then the priest, making the Sign of the Cross, says an absolving prayer. (This is not the absolution given in Penance):

“May the Almighty and most Merciful Lord grant us pardon, ✠ absolution and remission of our sins.”

The priest and the altar-boys, as spokesmen for the congregation, recite three short ejaculations begging mercy and help.

Ascending the altar, the priest prays that “We may be worthy to enter with pure minds into the Holy of Holies.”

In the Mass, the priest represents “the high priest, Jesus Christ, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26). No wonder he asks so often that the Father above, remit his past offenses and transgressions; no wonder he prays that he may be less unworthy to offer this Sacrifice for the world!

“Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord: or who shall stand in his holy place? The innocent of hands and clean of heart” (Psalm 23).

These sentiments of sorrow and amendment of life are also expressed in the prayer said at the altar:

“We beseech Thee, O Lord, by the merits of Thy saints [here, he kisses the altar] whose relics are here, and of all the saints, that Thou wouldst vouchsafe to forgive me all my sins. Amen.”

The priest kisses the altar in reverence and respect to all the saints, especially those whose relics are in the altar stone. The altar represents Christ Himself, in whom and through whom alone we can present to God acceptable sacrifices and prayers. In the center of the altar, where the chalice rests, is a small sealed cavity enclosing the relics of some martyrs. Every altar has this altar stone with relics for the reason that the first Christians during the persecutions said Mass in the Catacombs, using the tombs of the martyrs as altars. There is also the reason of fitness: they who shed their blood for Christ should rest in the altar, whereon is celebrated the Sacrifice of the Master who gave them the strengthening grace of martyrdom. They died for Christ and it is appropriate that they rest in the altar whereon His death is represented. Saint John, in his vision, “saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (Apocalypse 6:9).

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What does *Confiteor* mean? Why is it said at this time?
2. Why do we confess to the Blessed Virgin? To the apostles?  
To our brethren?
3. Why do we strike our breasts during this prayer?
4. Does the *Confiteor* remove sin? Is it like confession?
5. Why does the priest kiss the altar when he ascends to the altar?
6. Why are relics in the altar-stone?

## THE INTROIT

The *Introit* (which is Latin for "he enters") of our Mass is a remnant of the complete psalm which was sung in its entirety, while the celebrant and his assisting ministers proceeded from the secretorium (our sacristy) to the foot of the altar. In the first centuries, up to the Avignon residence of the Popes, the entry of the clergy from the front of the church formed a solemn and stately procession. The Masses then, at least the public ones, were sung Masses. Now, due to changed conditions, we no longer have the old entrance processions with the singing of a complete psalm. The priest, and the choir at High Mass, now say the antiphon, one verse of a psalm and the *Glory be to the Father* at the epistle side of the altar.

The celebrant at the first word of the *Introit* blesses himself with the Sign of the Cross. This practice goes back to the time when the *Introit* was the actual beginning of the Mass and the prayers of preparation at the foot of the altar were not ordered. At a Requiem Mass, the priest does not sign himself, but traces a cross over the Mass-book. This cross is not for the Missal, but for the departed souls who are the special concern of the Church during this Mass. Nor is the *Glory be to the Father* said at the *Introit* of Requiems and the penitential Masses, for during these Masses the Church expresses no indication of joy and gladness.

The *Introit* is a variable portion of the Mass, that is, it changes with the different Masses. It is usually of striking beauty and has special reference to the day or to the saint whose feast is commemorated; it expresses briefly the prevailing idea in that particular Mass. Cardinal Wiseman says beautifully of the *Introit*, "It seems intended to be the keynote

to the whole service; which being one in its essence, yet adapts itself to all our wants, whether of propitiation or of thanksgiving; whether of evils to be averted or of blessings to be gained. Sometimes this introductory verse is loud and joyous,—‘Let us rejoice in the Lord’; sometimes low and plaintive,—‘Lord, have mercy on me’; in the Paschal solemnity the *Alleluia* rings through it all, like a peal of cheerful bells; in Passion-tide, even the *Glory be to the Father* is silent, and it falls melancholy and dull; when a saint is commemorated, the nature of his virtues and triumphs is at once proclaimed; if it be a festival of Our Lord, the mystery which it celebrates is solemnly announced.”

Let us give a few examples to illustrate the idea of the *Introit*. For the third Mass on Christmas, it begins: “A Child has been born to us and a Son has been given us.” The first line of Easter Sunday proclaims: “I am risen and I am still with thee, Alleluia, etc.” At the Requiem Mass: “Eternal rest give them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.”

Since the Mass directly began with the *Introit* for many centuries, its first words were used to designate the Mass of the day. So even today we still call the third Sunday in Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, *Laetare* Sunday, the first Sunday after Easter, *Quasi modo* Sunday, and the Masses “in black,” *Requiem* Masses.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What is the history of the *Introit*?
2. What is its purpose or spirit?
3. What changes take place in the *Introit* and in the *Confiteor* at a Requiem Mass, and why do they occur?

## THE KYRIE ELEISON

The *Kyrie Eleison* and the *Christe Eleison* are Greek expressions meaning "Lord, have mercy on us! Christ, have mercy on us!" The nine "*Kyries*" and "*Christes*" are all that remain of a litany of such invocations which were originally sung at this part of the Mass by the clergy and the people, or by the choirs.

This prayer is a cry for mercy and help, which the Church addresses to the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity; three to the Father, three to the Son and three to the Holy Ghost. The *Kyrie Eleison* is a short but powerful prayer. Short prayers ever seem to be the most sincere and truthful. When a heart is overflowing with sentiments, it gives expression to its emotions in short, meaningful words. There is no need, no time to use long sentences for the listener attends more to the sincerity of the petitioner than to his language. The *Kyrie* and the *Christe* are repeated several times to tell the extreme want and earnest desire of the one imploring aid.

The persistent cry for mercy and forgiveness and assistance in the *Kyrie* reminds one of this line from the Gospel: "Yet if he shall continue knocking, I say to you although he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend; yet, because of his importunity, he will rise and give him as many as he needeth" (Luke 11:8). It also reminds one of the humble prayer of the blind man of Jericho: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:35). And again, of the piteous petition of the ten lepers, "Lord have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:12).

The *Kyrie* was never translated from its Greek into Latin, the reason being, most likely, that there was no need, for its meaning was well known to the Latins, so perfectly human a prayer it was.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What is the meaning and spirit of the *Kyrie Eleison*?
2. Why is this Greek prayer in a Latin Mass?

### THE GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

After humbly and contritely beseeching the Three Persons in one God to have mercy on us, we naturally feel happy over the Lord's certain merciful answer; we anticipate in great gladness of heart His blotting out of our misdeeds. Therefore, with a joyful heart and loud voice we sing the *Gloria*, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good-will." Since the *Gloria* is a hymn of joy, it also is omitted at Masses of Requiem and penitential Masses.

Sacrifice, the supreme act of worship, has four ends: the adoration of God for His glory, giving thanks to God for goods received, petitioning God for help, and making reparation or satisfaction for sins committed against God. That is, worship is either an act of adoration, thanksgiving, petition, or satisfaction. The Mass is the perfect sacrifice of adoration, of thanksgiving, of petition, and of satisfaction for sin, and within the Mass how well are the four ends of the Sacrifice expressed in the *Gloria*! The text itself goes through them—we praise Him; we adore Him; we bless Him, that is, we proclaim we recognize His blessings; we glorify Him, that is, give Him honor and glory through good living and worship; we pray for mercy for the sins we have committed; we give Him thanks for having sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us. Christ is the glory of God; He is the incarnate grandeur and majesty of God. "All have sinned and do need the glory of God," that is, the Son of God (Romans 3:25). Again, we call on the Son, "the

Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world,” to have mercy on us. How the Church wishes us to realize that there is little fruit for us in the Mass unless we have a contrite heart! The best preparation for Mass is our gift of a generous and clean heart. A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit. “A contrite and humble heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 50). The *Gloria* tells us of a necessary reason for our attendance at Mass: to give glory to God as our Lord and Savior did by His life, and to obtain needy peace, that peace which the Prince of Peace alone can give (John 16:33; 14:27).

With thrilling joy and rapid hearts, may we sing or pray the *Gloria*, with the zest and alacrity of the angels on Christmas. “Singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19). “Let us be glad and rejoice and give glory to Him, the Lord our God, the Almighty” (Apocalypse 19:16).

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. What are the ends of sacrifice? How do these fit well with the Mass?
2. How does the *Gloria in Excelsis* fit in the Mass?
3. What is meant by glory? By peace?
4. Read in St. Luke the account of Our Lord’s birth and the angels’ welcome (Luke 2).
5. Explain phrase by phrase the different aspects of worship expressed in the *Gloria in Excelsis*?