

EXPOSITIO  
MISSAE



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THE MYSTERIES OF THE  
MASS EXPLAINED

SAINT BONAVENTURE

*Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB*

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Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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“Thou didst feed thy people with the food of angels, and gavest them bread from heaven prepared without labor; having in it all that is delicious, and the sweetness of every taste.”

WISDOM 16:20



# CONTENTS

<i>Translator's Note</i> .....	<i>ix</i>
<i>Saint Bonaventure's Prayer before Mass</i> .....	<i>xiii</i>

## EXPOSITION OF THE MASS

1. The Vestments of the Priest and their Meanings.....	3
2. The Meaning of the Name "Mass" and the Introductory Rites .....	7
3. The Liturgy of the Word .....	15
4. The Offertory until the Canon .....	25
5. The Canon of the Mass (Part I).....	35
6. The Canon of the Mass (Part II) .....	43
7. The Canon of the Mass (Part III).....	49
8. The Canon of the Mass (Part IV): The Words of Consecration and the Elevation .....	53
9. The Canon of the Mass (Part V) .....	65
10. The Canon of the Mass (Part VI) .....	71
11. The Canon of the Mass (Part VII).....	77

12. The Doxology, the Lord's Prayer, and Fraction Rite .....	85
13. The Exchange of Peace and the <i>Agnus Dei</i> .....	97
14. The Priestly Reception of Communion, the Prayer after Communion, and the Dismissal .....	101
<i>Saint Bonaventure's Prayer before Receiving     Communion</i> .....	103
<i>Saint Bonaventure's Prayer after Mass</i> .....	105



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

**T**he Mass is a central and essential part of the Christian life, the very source and summit of our devotion and piety. Instituted by Jesus Himself at the Last Supper and faithfully passed on by the apostles and their successors, it is not merely a memorial of the passion, death, and resurrection of Our Savior, but a true participation in His one redeeming sacrifice. It does not merely praise and invoke God, but causes Him to be really, truly, and substantially present. It is through the Mass that we become closest to Jesus and mystically partake in His passion, death, and resurrection. It is through the Mass that we receive the “Bread of the Angels,” which imparts to our fragile human nature the eternal life of God Himself.

It is not surprising that many commentaries on the Mass have been written over the years. But the one which merits primacy of place is that produced by Saint Bonaventure. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274), deservedly known as the Seraphic Doctor, was a great Franciscan mystic and scholastic theologian. As well as serving as seventh Minister-General of the Franciscans, he was an outstanding theologian, philosopher, preacher, teacher, and poet. His voluminous writings combine

vast erudition and outstanding intelligence with a radiant mystical insight and an unmistakable sanctity and humility.

His *Expositio Missae* (literally “Exposition of the Mass”) offers inspiring and touching insight into the multiple layers of meaning and symbolism embodied within the sacred actions of the Eucharistic celebration. It is to be noted that the Mass has changed in certain details over the centuries. Nevertheless, the texts and actions described by Bonaventure correspond very closely to the Tridentine Mass, also known as the Traditional Latin Mass. This Mass was not, of course, a new invention following the Council of Trent, but a faithful compilation and harmonization of the traditions which had already been in existence for many centuries. Having said that, before the availability of printed Missals, there was an inevitable minor degree of variation in numerous particular details. For this reason, there are certain instances where Bonaventure’s descriptions differ slightly from the Tridentine Missal.

To appreciate Bonaventure’s commentary most fruitfully, a familiarity with the texts and rubrics of the Traditional Latin Mass will be extremely helpful. However, readers who are only acquainted with the *Novus Ordo* will also be able to follow his explanations without substantial difficulty, especially if they are able to consult the Tridentine Missal. Of course, the text he refers to is the Roman Canon, identified in the *Novus Ordo* Missal as Eucharistic Prayer I, and which was *the* Eucharistic Prayer of the Latin Rite Church from late antiquity until the latter part of the twentieth century.

In preparing this translation, words and phrases in Latin and English have been freely juxtaposed as suits the specific context, since some of the explanations offered only make sense in relation to the original Latin text. Footnotes or parenthetical interpolations providing translations (and other useful or interesting details) have been added by the translator. Often Bonaventure will quote only the beginning of a passage from the Mass or from Scripture, assuming that his readers would know the text which follows by heart. In such cases, the complete text has been inserted for the benefit of the modern reader.

Offered also in this volume are some of the Seraphic Doctor's beautiful and passionate prayers—namely, those to be said before Mass, before the reception of Holy Communion, and after Mass. The first two are taken from his *De Preparatione ad Missam*, and the last one is a well-known prayer included in many older breviaries.

It is the hope of the translator that this work will be found inspiring, instructive, and illuminating; and, above all, that it may achieve Bonaventure's own stated goal—namely, that of helping his readers “to hear the most holy Mass with the greatest possible devotion and reverence.” For in doing this, we are being brought into ever deeper union with Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; Who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB,  
Abbey of the Most Holy Trinity,  
New Norcia, Western Australia



## SAINT BONAVENTURE'S PRAYER BEFORE MASS

**B**ehold, O heavenly Father! I offer to You this sacrifice of praise. As I do so, I reflect upon the death of Your only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Truly, this is the same sacrifice which He Himself offered for my salvation and for the salvation of all the world. Behold, I bear this living offering to the altar of Your Majesty, which is the very same offering which You made upon the altar of the cross for our sake!

O heavenly Father, recall that sacred perspiration which Your Son shed in His anxiety, and which flowed to the ground like great drops of blood. Look upon that immaculate flesh, cruelly struck with blows, bruised with slaps and clubs, discolored with wounds, dishonored by spittle, reddened by His freely flowing blood, pierced by the spikes of His crown of thorns, affixed to the wood of the cross by nails, and finally wounded with the spear which opened His sacred side.

May that same divine mercy, which drove Your Son to hang from the gibbet of the cross as the price of our liberty, impel You also, heavenly Father, to take pity on us. Look not

upon our sins, but on the face of Your beloved Son! For we seek forgiveness and pardon not by virtue of the multitude of our prayers, but rather through the grace of Your great mercy.  
*Amen.*

EXPOSITION  
OF THE MASS





# 1

## THE VESTMENTS OF THE PRIEST AND THEIR MEANINGS

**T**he apostle Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, speaks of “Christ standing as our High Priest.”<sup>1</sup> For He is indeed our true High Priest. And so immense is Christ’s priestly dignity that everything which bishop and priests do in the celebration of Mass represents Him in some manner. As I know that you, O Reader, wish to hear the most holy Mass with the greatest possible devotion and reverence, I shall write to you on what the words and actions of the Mass signify, and how they represent the person and actions of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is to be noted that firstly the priest puts on the *amice*. This item, which extends to the shoulders, is regarded as one of the sacred vestments. Following this, he robes himself with an *alb*, and girdles himself with a *cincture*. He then places a *maniple*

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 9:11.

over his left arm. He then drapes a long *stole* around his neck, and finally puts on the *chasuble*.

We will briefly explain what each of these vestments signify. The amice, covering the upper body, represents Christ as Head of the Church, Who concealed His divinity beneath the veil of His humanity.

The alb, which is white and clean, signifies the purity of Christ, of Whom Saint Peter said, “He committed no sin, and there was no deception to be found in His mouth.”<sup>2</sup> Such cleanness from the stain of sin is imparted by Christ to each one of us through the sacrament of Baptism. The linen fabric of the alb is made clean by washing it in water, corresponding to the purifying action of the waters of the baptismal font.

The cincture symbolizes the virginity of both Christ and His most chaste Mother. Our Lord similarly exhorts us all to cultivate such chastity and purity, insofar as we are able, when He said, “Let your loins be girded!”<sup>3</sup>

The maniple, placed on the left arm, symbolizes the humility and meekness of Christ during His earthly life. But it also signifies His readiness for battle and His courage in combat. For Our Lord indeed fought bravely for justice and truth, and He single-handedly conquered the world and overturned the dominion of the devil. In this regard, the maniple may be viewed as a representation of a shield, equipping the one who bears

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:22.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:35.

it for battle for the sake of justice. And Christ urged us to be ready for such warfare, when He said, “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice.”<sup>4</sup>

The long stole, which is placed around the neck and hangs before the heart and then extends to the feet, signifies the obedience of Christ and His voluntary servitude for the sake of our salvation. For He, so that He might save us from eternal damnation, “became obedient to the Father unto death, even death on the cross.”<sup>5</sup> This is symbolized by the form of the cross, which is customarily embroidered onto the stole where it passes over the chest. The design of the cross over the heart of the priest serves to remind all the assembly that we also ought to carry the passion of Christ in our heart at all times.

The chasuble (*casula*), which means literally “a small house,” (*parva casa*) signifies Christ as filling both heaven and earth, just as He declared through the prophet, “Heaven and earth I have filled.”<sup>6</sup> It also symbolizes the all-encompassing charity with which we ought to love our friends *in* God, and our enemies *because of* God. Christ taught us this holy lesson both by word and by example. For in the Gospel of Matthew, it is recorded that He said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:10.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:8.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 23:24.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:44.