

LET US PRAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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During this Year of the Eucharist, I offer a series of articles on Eucharistic Spirituality:
Source of Life and Mission of our Church.

Article #3 – A Brief History of the Mass

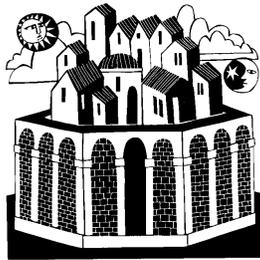
The story of the Mass is very long and very complex. This reflection offers you snapshots of how it developed over time.

Origins of our Mass (30-300)

Our rituals grew out of a rich Jewish heritage. Jewish synagogue service opened with prayer (Shema), followed by two benedictions, reading of 10 Commandments (by a reader), 18 prayers and benedictions with “Amen” response of the congregation, a lesson from the law and also from the prophets, a homily, and benediction.

Remember that the first Christians were Jews and lived in Palestine. They understood Jesus to be the Messiah and initially at least did not see themselves to be a movement separate from Judaism. They continued to worship in the temple and synagogue along with their fellow countrymen, living as good Jews, keeping the law. Christians in Palestine did not cease worshiping in the synagogue and temple until they were barred from synagogues following the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

When they began worshiping separately, the Jewish worship pattern structure became an integral part of early Christian worship. Christianity eventually broke from Judaism. In the Gentile churches founded by Paul the pattern of synagogue worship was largely carried over into Christian worship services.



Christianity was multinational and with time most Christians were Gentiles. Justin Martyr describes 2nd century liturgies: they were held on Sunday, they started with reading of the memoirs of the apostles or writings of the prophets, they included a homily by the presider, those gathered stand for prayers. Justin writes: “Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he, taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands.

And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water, over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.”

In the early centuries Christians worshiped as small groups in a home, which was called “the house of the church” (the people being the church) with the altar on the east side. They used everyday bread and wine. They sang as they prayed. Their worship pattern, marked with informality and spontaneity, was similar to ours: gathering, listening to the scriptures proclaimed and the homily that followed, general prayers, engaging in the eucharistic prayer, sharing in communion, and being sent forth.

In times of persecution, they worshiped in the catacombs or hidden places. The language of their prayer was usually koiné Greek, or sometimes Aramaic or Syrian.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome: we all partake of the one loaf and become one body. Ignatius of Antioch sees in the singing a sign of our unity, as we praise God with one voice. Justin Martyr spoke of the celebration as transforming *us*. Hippolytus of Rome connected the eucharistic celebration with concern for the poor.

Christians stood for the entire prayer to symbolize their belief that they had risen with Christ and were ready to greet him when he comes again.



The Roman Era (300-800)

The position of the church in society changed dramatically when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, and even more when he designated it as the official religion of the empire in the fourth century.

Now the language of the liturgy, originally Aramaic, changed because Latin was the tongue of the empire. Persecution of the church stopped. People flocked to church liturgies, which took place in large ‘basilicas’, oblong halls or buildings – belonging to the emperor (basileus) - with double colonnades and a semicircular apse, used in ancient Rome as a court of law or for public assemblies.

St. Ambrose and Augustine both speak of the eucharist as transforming us into the body of Christ. But the Latin liturgy became filled with Roman/imperial symbols.

Different views of Christ’s humanity and divinity emerged. Arians stressed strongly and with intensity his divinity (and distance from us). Railings were erected to separate the people from the clergy. Increasingly less emphasis was placed on lay participation. Liturgical art underscored Christ’s distance from us.

The Arian heresy, which denied Christ's divinity, led the church to stress his divinity more and more and to eclipse his humanity, a perspective increasingly represented in the art of this time. Church buildings reflected the distance between clergy and lay people in worship. Liturgical texts began to be standardized.

Medieval Times (800-1200)

In the ninth century, worship looked quite different from that of the early christian church. Few people now understood Latin, which remained the language of the liturgy.

Allegorical interpretations of the Mass, explaining the actions of the liturgy as images of past events in scripture or history, became common. Some Christians adopted an overly 'physical' approach to the consecrated bread, reporting visions of bleeding hosts or of Christ on the cross.

Thomas Aquinas tried to counter this literalism, but it was strong in the ethos of the 12th century church. A shift took place from appreciating the eucharist as an action of all the faithful participating with eagerness, to viewing eucharist as an object instilling a sense of mystery and fear. Communion in the form of unleavened bread was received in the mouth, not in the hand. Most people stopped drinking from the cup. Emphasis had moved from the transformed people to the transformed elements.

Around the year 1,000, the altar began to be placed against the wall, separated from the people, and was approached only by the priest, who stood with his back to the assembly.

In the late medieval period the rood screen appears: an ornate physical, symbolic barrier separating the altar area for clergy from the nave for the laity.



Middle Ages to Trent (1220-1545)

The thirteenth century saw the start of the practice of elevating the host after the consecration for the people to see, and the insistence that people kneel at this time rather than bow. Music and architecture enhanced this sense of profound awe, fear, and reverence.

The later Middle Ages saw increased adoration of the consecrated host. This led to the development of benediction and eucharistic processions, as people focused more on viewing the consecrated bread than on receiving it. Veneration of saints relics and emphasis on indulgences became important. The Council of Trent identified a variety of liturgical abuses.

The sense of Christ's presence in the people and the unity which is the eucharist's purpose was lost. Subsequently, Protestant worship focused almost exclusively on the proclamation of the word. Since Vatican II Catholics have recovered a reverence for the scripture, and Protestant churches are celebrating the Eucharist more frequently.

Trent to Vatican II (1545-1962)

After the Council of Trent, a single missal was mandated for the Western church, standardizing the liturgy. This remained the pattern for 417 years until the Second Vatican Council called for a reform of the liturgy that led to a new missal and variations for different cultures.

The missal of Pope Pius V, issued after the Council of Trent did not presume the presence of an assembly; its focus was on the priest and his words and actions.

After the Council of Trent, the tabernacle was placed on the main altar, and people often received communion outside of Mass. Multiple altars in the church were filled with individual priests simultaneously 'saying' Mass, usually alone.

The Missal of Pope Paul VI, issued after Vatican II, calls for the "full, conscious, and active participation of the assembly" in the liturgy.



Vatican II was a Copernican revolution for our church and our way of worshiping. It's an era that is still emerging.

Communion rails have disappeared. Lay ministers are welcomed to serve the assembly's faith, along with ordained ministers, both in the liturgy of the word and in the liturgy of the eucharist. Communion is widely shared with both bread and wine. The altar is facing the people. Ministers of music have moved from lofts to the assembly. Lay ministers of hospitality assist the assembly to gather and take leave. The language of liturgy is the vernacular, not Latin. The document on Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II stipulated that "the treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word." And happily this has happened.

All of this is far more than window dressing. On the one hand it shapes our vision of ourselves as church and our mission. The eucharist builds us as church, and the church makes the eucharist!

On the other hand it opens us to Pope Francis' invitation to be a 'synodal' church of accompaniment not domination, committed to discerning God's word, with joyful care for one another, service of the weakest in our midst, and humble respect for our planet.