

# Do This in Memory of Me

## A Brief History of the Mass

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“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

These inspired words of the Apostle Paul give us one of the earliest and clearest descriptions of the Eucharistic Liturgy, the Mass, right in the heart of Sacred Scripture. In faithful response to the command of our Lord to “Do this...in remembrance of me”, the Church gathers daily, and especially on Sunday, to commemorate the Last Supper, the living and unbloody sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. In this way, the words of the prophet Malachi (as interpreted by the Didache, a 1st century document articulating the doctrines taught by the Apostles) are fulfilled and upheld in the Tradition of the Church: “From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations; Incense offerings are made to my name everywhere, and a pure offering; For my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 1:11).

The word eucharist is taken from the Greek, which means “thanksgiving.” The English term liturgy comes from the Greek word leitourgia, which means the public “work of the people.” The early Christian celebration of the Eucharist combined two forms of worship that were central to Jewish worship. The first was the weekly synagogue service, which centered on the Scriptures. We must recall that the first Christians were all practicing Jews. They did not see themselves

as separating from the Jewish faith and starting a new religion. Rather, they saw themselves as they were—faithful Jews who had received and followed the promised Messiah. Hence, they continued to go to the synagogue to hear and celebrate the inspired Word of God. They continued this practice until they were banned from the synagogue, after which they continued to proclaim the Word of God and listen to the teaching of the Apostles apart from the synagogue. This aspect of early Christian worship was the source of the first half of the Mass which we call the Liturgy of the Word. The second form of Jewish worship that the early Christians maintained was the Passover/Sabbath meal celebrated in the home, now rendered complete by the sacrifice of

the Eucharist. In instituting the Last Supper and thus giving to his Church the model for worship, Jesus fulfilled what had been foreshadowed in the Passover of the Old Testament. Now his followers would receive not just a symbol, but rather the true Lamb of God—Christ fully present in the Blessed Sacrament. Now they would be saved not merely from physical death, but from the spiritual death brought on by sin.

This Eucharistic celebration of the early Christians, which developed into the second half of the Mass called the Liturgy of the Eucharist, generally occurred in the homes of the people and/or in secret places such as the catacombs (underground cemeteries) during times of persecution. The celebration of the sacrifice of the Eucharist on tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs inaugurated the practice of placing the relics of the saints in or under the altars once the Church came out of the catacombs to practice the faith freely.

In the first centuries of the Church, the Eucharistic Liturgy was celebrated in the language of the people. Most frequently Greek was used, and later Latin became the norm in the Western Church. After the terrible bloodshed of the various empyreal persecutions of the Church, Christianity became

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legalized through the Edict of Milan promulgated by the Emperor Constantine in 313 AD. The Mass no longer had to be practiced in secret in private homes or catacombs, and Christians began to build public places for worship. Rather than using 'temples' Christians modeled their spaces for worship on large public buildings commonly known as basilicas. The architecture and layout were largely the same, with the bishop sitting in the chair at the head of the building (the apse) where the magistrate or Roman official would sit and preside in a public building. The bishops, priests, and deacons also began to develop liturgical vestments that in some ways reflected the authoritative vestments of the Roman officials, and this has continued in the liturgical tradition of the Church.

All participated fully in the celebration of the Eucharist. The prayers were improvised freely by the bishop who was the normal leader of the assembly since there were no liturgical books at that time. It is probable that, while these prayers were improvised in the first centuries, they became more formulaic despite the absence of formal liturgical books as new bishops were ordained and the traditions of the Liturgy were passed on and learned from these mentoring presiders. The Eucharistic Prayer, the great prayer of Thanksgiving, was proclaimed by the presider while the assembly expressed their assent in song. The people brought forth their gifts for the poor and those in need because of the relationship between the Eucharist and social justice. The gifts also came to represent the lives of the faithful being offered up to God and transformed by the Eucharist.

A more dialogical exchange of prayer between the presider and the faithful was practiced in the first centuries of the Church, and continues to be visible in the Eastern Catholic Churches. For the Roman Church this was less common especially

after the publication of the Missal of St. Pius V in 1570 which codified the prayers and form of the Mass to ensure uniformity throughout the Western Church. Vatican II and the Novus Ordo Mass reestablished a more active vocal participation of the faithful in the various parts of the Mass after 1965.

By the beginning of the Middle Ages, the liturgy had developed and expanded and was prayed in Latin. Gradually the role of the laity lessened and the role of priests and deacons was more prominent. The priest celebrated the Mass with his back to the people and the Eucharistic prayer was prayed silently. A bell was rung during the

words of consecration to alert the faithful to what was happening at the altar.

A shift in eucharistic piety during this time gradually led to a growing scrupulosity over the reception of the Eucharist. Fewer people received Communion at Mass because they felt unworthy. By the 13th century people stopped receiving Communion from the cup and received the consecrated host on their tongue. In many cases Holy Communion was no longer distributed at

Mass.

The decline in lay participation in the liturgy led some bishops at the Council of Trent [1545] to propose that the laity stay at home and allow the priest to say his Mass without a congregation. Although this proposal was rejected, it indicates how far the Mass had changed from the early Church. It is no wonder that the Church issued legislation requiring the reception of communion at least once a year!

The Missal of Pope Pius V was issued following the Council of Trent. The reforms established by the Council were largely in response to the Protestant Reformation and the disruption and damage this was inflicting upon the Catholic

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faithful of the time. Protestant novelties and non-Catholic theology regarding the Eucharist and the essentials of the Mass necessitated crucial changes that led to the new Missal promulgated by Pope Pius V. The Missal regulated every liturgical detail and included medieval additions such as the Prayers at the Foot of the Altar and the “Last Gospel” at the end of Mass. This uniformity of the Mass in the Roman Rite was intended to ensure faithfulness to the ancient practices and doctrines of the Church, safeguarding the Blessed Sacrament, and authentic Catholic worship. From this time on, very little was changed in the Mass until the Second Vatican Council some 400 years later.

The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council restored the active participation of the people at Mass and directed that the faithful “should not be there as strangers or silent spectators” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 47). The Constitution also called for a revision of the Mass that simplified the rites and discarded those elements during the passage of time that were duplications or were added with little advantage. Finally, it required the restoration of those elements that had “suffered injury through accident of history” to “be restored to the vigor they had in the traditions of the Fathers” (CSL, 50). Vatican II has given a stronger role to

laity in various roles in the Liturgy, and the new translation of the Roman Missal issued in English in Advent of 2011 has ensured a more accurate translation from the Latin of the prayers and responses in the Mass, also bringing back a deeper sense of Sacred Scripture and the exalted tone of prayer and worship of God that was present in the Mass prior to Vatican II. While the *Novus Ordo* remains the norm throughout most of the Roman Rite, Pope John Paul II called for bishops everywhere to make the pre-Vatican II Latin (or Tridentine) Mass available wherever it is desired by their people, and Pope Benedict XVI granted every priest the right to celebrate this in his parish, providing it also to the parishioners if any of the faithful there desire it. These actions on the part of our recent Popes have helped to maintain the rich liturgical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, ensuring that the brilliant liturgical beauty and variety of the Church is maintained and available to all.

Like the first Christians, we continue to worship the Lord in the Mass in all of the same essential ways. If a Catholic today were transported back in time to the early Church, the Eucharistic Liturgy they would encounter would not be alien, but strikingly familiar.