

What Every Catholic Must Believe About the Mass

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the unbloody repetition of the Sacrifice of Calvary, in which Christ is both victim and Priest.

Since no other sacrifice can be so pleasing to God or so worthy of God, the Mass is the only sacrifice enjoined by the New Law.

This sacrifice is of infinite merit. The celebration of Holy Mass effects the application of those infinite merits to our own needs and to those who offer and for whom the sacrifice is offered.

Explanation of the Chart. In this chart the variable parts, or Propers of the Roman Mass are marked with an asterisk (*). Those of the (Solemn) High Mass are marked thus (°), For the sake of clearness and completeness account is taken of some small features which are on occasion omitted, as the incensation and the carrying of lights at the Gospel and the Kiss of Peace, peculiarities of (Solemn) High Mass.

The Divine Office, it will be noted, is represented as surrounding the Holy Sacrifice like a gorgeous rainbow. As the Mass is celebrated from the rising of the sun to its going down, in part it precedes Holy Mass (Matins, Lauds, Prime, Tierce), and in part follows it (Sext, None, Vespers, Compline). The progress of the Mass is best represented by the familiar notion of the drama, the cycle of which rises from quiet beginnings to a grand triumph or climax. The ascending action of the Mass-drama is illustrated by the steps here set down. The Liturgical climax, number 35 in the chart, is not identical with the essence of the Mass, number 29 in the chart. In every study of the Mass we must keep in mind that the Mass is essentially the perpetuation and representation of the sacrificial death of Christ on Calvary; this is not to be found precisely in the words of Consecration, but in the Consecration itself.

There is, however, a liturgical climax apart from and distinct from the essence of the Mass. It is the object of this chart to portray graphically the dramatic action of the Mass; to show, namely, how the various steps are interrelated and ascend through gradual stages to their climax, the full fruits of which are to be gained in the subsequent actions both within the Mass itself and throughout the Christian life. Although in the Consecration (29) the essence of the sacrificial death of Christ has been attained, the liturgical action moves on. It reaches its summit when the priest and the faithful united with him, "through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ," present before the throne of the Blessed Trinity the blood of the Lamb that was slain.

The Mass of the Catechumens. In the drama of the Mass we may distinguish two acts, the Mass of the Catechumens and the Mass of the Faithful. The first part of the Mass may be likened to the initial act of the great Drama. It is called Mass of the Catechumens because the catechumens, that is, those who were preparing for baptism, were once allowed to attend only the part of the sacred liturgy. Prayer and instruction taken from the Old and New Testaments make up the elements of this act of the Drama, which may be said to reach its own summit in the reading of the holy Gospel. This service was concluded with the dismissal of the catechumens before the beginning of the coming sacrifice, the Mass of the Faithful. It is modeled on the venerable Jewish synagogue service of prayer and instruction.

Prayers in the Mass of the Catechumens (1-5). The prayers said at the foot of the altar express contrition and sorrow for sin. Purified in heart and mind, the priest proceeds to the altar. The Prayer Service is full of acts of petition (Kyrie), praise (Gloria), and contains in a very special manner a prayer for the grace suggested by the feast celebrated (Collect)

Symbol: A brazier of incense, significant of the praise to God rising from our prayer. *Dominus vobiscum: This greeting of the priest should be viewed as an invitation to participate with him in the prayer and sacred action. The response "Et cum spiritu tuo" is our assent to this invitation.

Instruction (6-12). The Epistle, or the Lesson, is a message to us from the great apostles or prophets as God's messengers. The Gospel—the Good Tidings—is God speaking to us in the person of His only Son. Hence the use of lights and incense at Solemn High Mass may be said to do all honor to the message of Christ, our King and Lord The Credo is our act of faith, a seal upon the lessons we have learned.

Symbol: The open Gospel book, suggesting the word of God contained therein.

The Mass of the Faithful

Bringing of Gifts(13-22) A sacrifice is a gift solemnly offered to God in the name of all. Hence all present are supposed to have a share in the gifts of the Mass. Now bread and wine are the gifts we bring to the altar. This is Christ's own ordination. In the bread and wine are our own offerings included. Together with these gifts we should bring that of our own heart, a heart fully determined ever to be faithful to God.

Symbol: Bread and wine. To connote God's absolute dominion over us we offer those very elements which are essential for the sustaining of life within us.

The Sacrificial Action (22-35) This begins with the solemn words and tones (High Mass) of the Preface. This act of thanksgiving extends throughout the entire Canon of the Mass.

Through the words of transubstantiation our gifts of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. In this sublime act Christ again offers the same infinite praise and satisfaction to His eternal Father which He offered in His bloody sacrifice on the cross. As on Calvary, so in every holy Mass, Christ offers himself to the Father in union with His Church. Thus through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Christ and we united with Him offer an act of infinite glory and honor to the eternal Father.

This tremendous act of Christ is completely contained in the Consecration of the Mass. However, in order that we may more fully understand these great realities, they have been drawn out through various prayers and ceremonies. This is the purpose of the liturgical aspect of the Mass, which rises to a climax in the last solemn offering of our Gift: (35) "Through Him and with Him and in Him be to thee, Almighty Father, in union with the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Symbol: The host and chalice are in the position in which the priest holds them at holy Mass when he pronounces the words of the last offering prayer. The dove is the symbol of the Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier. The three fingers with the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, make up a commonly known symbol of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered to the most Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ.

The Sacrifice-Banquet (36-49). Our Gift has accepted. God's generosity is unbounded and He returns to us the Gift of the body and blood of Christ as food and nourishment for our souls. Beginning with the sublime prayer taught us by our Blessed Lord Himself, we are preparing ourselves for the reception of Holy Communion. All the prayers now lead up to that. These prayers and ceremonies are expressive of the peace and charity which should be ours when we approach the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ.

Symbol: Spotless doves eating of the fruit of the vine are expressive of the pure soul which strengthens itself in partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Conclusion (49-55). The Gift of God, the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, is the most wonderful of the works of God. We should be thankful, not only for a few moments after the reception of Holy Communion, but throughout the whole day. Eucharist means thanksgiving. We should never forget that the Eucharistic Sacrifice is in the first place an act of worship and an act of praise and honor and thanksgiving to God. The Mass itself is our greatest act of thanksgiving. The anthems and prayers in the concluding part of the Mass have reverence to the Sacrament of the Altar.

Symbol: The burning lamp. Like the virgins in the Gospel story, the lamp of our faith and the warm glow of our love must ever be kept alive within us. We must be prepared to meet our Blessed Lord in eternity at any time with the lamp of our faith and the fire of our love steadily burning.

The Mass During the Day Catholic Action.

A Christian must learn to view his daily life through the Mass. From our Mass in the morning come strength and grace for the day. In the Mass of the Catechumens we offer to God the incense of our prayer and we receive in return the word of God as inspiration and encouragement. In the Mass of the Faithful we offer the gift of our hearts together with the body and blood of Christ and there is prepared for us the Bread of Life which is for the nourishment of our souls. If we approach and partake of the Sacrificial Banquet we receive sanctifying grace, so that in very truth we become more like to Christ. The very particular effect of Holy Communion in our souls is an increase of actual charity, which is the grace and strength we need in a daily program of Catholic Action.

Symbol: The Standard of Christ. Under this standard we must pray and live throughout the day. This must be our morning offering made through the sacred liturgy. To Christ we consecrate our day and our whole life, even to its very last moment, that we may reign with Him forever in the Eternal Mansion.