



# CATECHETICAL SUNDAY

## SEPTEMBER 18, 2011

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



## Celebrating the Mass through the Ages

by Norbertine Father Alfred McBride

*I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and city squares. . . Even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 8, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/special\\_features/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_enc\\_20030417\\_ecclesia\\_eucharistia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html))*

From the Last Supper to the Mass of the Apostles, from house churches to medieval cathedrals, from the Tridentine Mass to the Novus Ordo following Vatican II, the Mass has undergone many changes in two thousand years. Yet for Catholics, the Mass is the summit and source of our Christian life. At its core, the Mass is unchanged. The historical changes should be understood as organic developments that sustain what Jesus did at the Last Supper. This theme governs our story of how the Mass was celebrated through the ages

### The Lord's Supper

In the last week of his life, Jesus arranged a final meal with his Apostles to celebrate the Passover. He also used this occasion to institute the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. He greeted the Apostles in the role of a humble servant, kneeling before them and washing their feet. He rejected Peter's refusal with the words, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me" (Jn 13:8). Peter submitted. Christ began his Eucharist with humble service, and he expected his future priests to do the same.

On the table before them, the Apostles saw the typical food and drink for a Passover meal: salt water, bitter salad, unleavened bread, roast lamb, wine, and the Blessing Cup—a chalice filled with wine. They began the meal singing a psalm praising God. Next came the ritual of the bread that symbolized their unity, because they partook of the same loaf. But something new happened. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you" (Lk 22:19). Later, Jesus took the large Blessing Cup filled with wine, blessed it, gave to them, and said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many" (Matt 26:28).

Jesus identified himself with the bread and wine, and he also associated these elements with his forthcoming

passion: his Body to be given up, and his Blood to be shed. Jesus had prepared them for this sacred development on two occasions: first, by his multiplication of the loaves, a miracle reported six times in the gospels; and second, when he forcefully instructed the assembly at Capernaum about the Eucharist: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (Jn 6:54).

After Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he said to his Apostles, "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). Pope John Paul II wrote of the importance of these words: "When he says to the apostles, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' he constitutes the ministry of this sacrament in the Church. . . . Holy Thursday is the birthday of the Eucharist and the birthday of our priesthood" (Pope John Paul II, *Letters to my Brother Priests* [Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1979], 104).

When we use the term "memory," we recall past events, and they remain past. The discovery of America happens only once. Scripture uses memory of the divine order in a different sense. For the Jewish people, the memory of their liberation from Egypt and God's providential care is made present in their Passover celebration.

What is the difference between the Jewish Passover and the Catholic Eucharist? "In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United

States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2000], no. 1364).

In the Eucharist, "Christ associates his Church and all her members with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; . . . by this sacrifice he pours out the graces of salvation on his Body which is the Church. . . . It is Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the same Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who is the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice" (CCC, nos. 1407, 1410). The Holy Eucharist makes present to us the redemption from sin and the gift of divine life Christ won for us by his life, Death, and Resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith, we experience Christ's historic redemptive act through our participation in the Mass.

## From Apostolic Times to the Start of the Fourth Century

After Pentecost, the Christian community continued to celebrate the Eucharist as the "Breaking of the Bread." "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Apostles faced questions about how to celebrate Eucharist. It could not be the same as the Passover meal, which was only celebrated once a year. Nor should it be just a Sabbath meal with Eucharistic words included. One of their first decisions was to move the celebration to Sunday in memory of Christ's Resurrection. Soon, the Apostles and their bishop successors

separated the Breaking of the Bread from a meal.

As they reflected on what was needed, they concluded that a Liturgy of the Word should precede the words of institution. From their Jewish background, they were accustomed to the services at the synagogue that included readings from Scripture, singing psalms, and hearing a homily based on the texts. Eventually, they introduced the Liturgy of the Word to the Eucharist. They included memories (oral traditions) of what Jesus said and did. As the letters of Sts. Peter and Paul circulated, they entered the canon of Christian readings. When the oral traditions of the Gospels became written texts, they became part of the Liturgy of the Word.

Gradually, the Church leaders also composed eucharistic prayers of preparation to precede the words of institution, and prayers of thanksgiving and memorials of the living and the dead to follow them. These developments happened at an early stage, and we have first records of this in a document known as the Didache (Teaching of the Apostles) dated in the late first century. By the year 150, we know from the writings of St. Justin Martyr that the general structure of the eucharistic liturgy as we know it now was in place.

### ***House Churches***

We have become so accustomed to churches, chapels, cathedrals, bell towers, spires, stained glass, altars, sculptures, organs, pews, kneelers, lecterns, and other aspects of worship spaces that we tend to forget that, for the first three centuries of the Church,

the Mass was usually celebrated in someone's home. Many New Testament texts remind us of this. "Give greetings to the brothers in Laodicea, and to Nympha and to the church in her house" (Col 4:15). "Greet Pisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, . . . greet also the Church in their house" (Rom 16:3, 5).

The Roman state forbade Christian temples or churches. Normally they selected a home large enough to accommodate as many as a hundred people, either in a big hall or an atrium. Ordained bishops or presbyters (priests), assisted by deacons, presided at liturgies. The intimacy of this setting, along with the bonding of a persecuted people—a number of whom were martyred—witnessed the growth of generations of devout and practicing Christians. "All should respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as all should regard the Bishop as the image of the Father and the clergy as God's senate and the college of the apostles. Without these three orders you cannot begin to speak of church" (St. Ignatius of Antioch [Years 50-107], Liturgy of the Hours, vol. 4, 351-52).

### ***Liturgical Languages***

Which languages were used for worship? Jesus spoke in Aramaic at the Last Supper. Aramaic was used in the early Church and to this day is used in Chaldean churches in Syria and Iraq. As Christianity spread, the liturgies were celebrated in Latin and Greek, but also in Coptic for Egyptians and Ethiopians.

## The Eucharist in the Time of the Fathers

The Emperor Constantine decreed freedom of religion for Christianity in 313. He spent huge sums of money to build large churches for the Christians. Gradually, the celebration of the Eucharist moved from homes to church buildings. The simple table at home became a prominent stone or marble altar at church. The singing of litanies for processions and responsorial psalms throughout the Mass was deemed a practical way to unify the crowds who came to worship. Celebrants wore senatorial-type robes (their "Sunday best") that, after many years of use, were renamed "vestments." The simple plates and cups of the house liturgy evolved into gold chalices and patens at church worship. Gregorian chant was adopted as music for hymns, especially the popular ones composed by St. Ambrose.

The outline of the Mass in the house liturgies persisted in the transition to churches. The texts used for the readings remained, as did those for eucharistic prayers before and after the consecration. Over time there were additions that we still use today, such as the *Gloria*, the *Creed*, and newer Eucharistic Prayers. Because celebrants tended to add spontaneous thoughts, the liturgists created standardized editions of the texts of the Mass.

This period witnessed the emergence of a number of brilliant preachers, including St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, and St. Athanasius. Their homilies and writings were profound explanations of Scripture as well as pastoral instructions for developing the faith of

the multitudes, especially during the celebration of the Mass. The wisdom of the Fathers formed a strong tradition that helped the evangelization of the Roman Empire in both east and west. Their defense of the faith provided a sure guide to holiness and virtue for those confused by false teachings. This period solidified the traditions of worship from apostolic times and transmitted them to succeeding generations.

## The Middle Ages

By the twelfth century, the Church of northern Europe flourished. It fostered a coherent culture that was symbolized by the dramatic growth of Gothic cathedrals soaring over the countryside with their towers and spires. The architects sponsored the art of stained-glass windows that pictured the stories of the Bible and flooded their new buildings with incredible color. But the congregation was separated from the altar by the choir stalls and often by a metal screen that hid the sanctuary. Eventually side altars and small chapels along the side aisles reconnected people with the altar, but usually as silent spectators attending the ceremony. The rise of a heresy denying the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist caused much confusion. The Church responded by supporting adoration of the reserved Sacrament outside of Mass, which helped people recover their faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Corpus Christi festival with its colorful processions augmented the return to the Mass and the Sacrament. Reverence for the reserved species was and is constant. The medieval love of pilgrimages, such as

those to Canterbury's shrine of St. Thomas Becket or to Compostela's shrine of St. James, were always centered on solemn celebrations of the Eucharist.

## The Counter-Reformation—Sixteenth Century

The Protestant Reformation denied the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, rejected the celibate priesthood, and refused to acknowledge that the Mass was a sacrifice. It also rejected the authority of the pope and the claim of Catholics to be the one true Church of Christ. Protestants held their services in the local languages and offered the congregation wine as well as bread.

The Catholic response at the Council of Trent reasserted the Mass as a sacrifice, the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, a celibate priesthood, the authority of the pope, and the doctrine of the one true Church. Latin was kept as the language of the liturgy, and Communion was given only under the species of bread. The new baroque architecture brought the congregation closer to the sanctuary, with the pews just in front of the altar rail. The tabernacle was on the altar. Above the tabernacle was a niche for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. The grandeur of the sanctuary was thought of as the throne room of God.

There was a surge of interest in developing personal spirituality, which offered a powerful aid to benefiting from the Mass. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius provided for clergy and laity alike an accessible format for devoting time to interior prayer and developing a sound relationship with

Christ. On a loftier level, the teachings of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross invited many to the rewards of contemplative prayer. Beyond this, popular piety abounded, especially adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the devotion of Forty Hours, and pilgrimages to Marian shrines where the Mass was central. "The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love. Let us not refuse the time to go to meet him in adoration, in contemplation full of faith, and open to making amends for the serious offenses and crimes of the world. Let our adoration never cease" (Pope John Paul II, *Dominicae cenae*, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_24021980\\_dominicae-cenae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_24021980_dominicae-cenae_en.html), no. 1380).

## The Mass in the Era of Vatican II

### *The Roots of Renewal*

A century before Vatican II, the stirrings of liturgical renewal began. The Monks of Solesmes Abbey initiated the revival of Gregorian chant and scholarly studies of the liturgy in the times of the Apostles and the early Church Fathers. Dom Guéranger wrote a series of books giving a catechesis of the whole liturgical year. Dom Odo Casel of Maria Laach Abbey wrote *The Mystery of Christian Worship* about the spiritual depths and saving power of the liturgy. In 1909, Dom Lambert Beauduin delivered a paper on the need for active participation of our people in the liturgy.

St. Pius X (1835-1914) confirmed these developments by encouraging frequent Communion, approving Gregorian chant, and inviting active participation of the people in the Mass. Pope Pius XII, who also revised the Holy Week liturgy, fully supported the active participation in the Mass.

The first document published by Vatican II was *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, or *The Constitution on the Liturgy* (December 4, 1963). It summarized and codified much of the research mentioned above. It approved the beginnings of vernacular usage and a much wider use of Scripture as we now have it.

Gradually, a *novus ordo* (new order) of the Mass appeared. The basic structure was kept: gathering prayer, readings from Scripture, and a homily. The *Gloria* and *Credo* were kept for Sundays and feasts. The offering of gifts, the preface, the *Sanctus*, and the Eucharistic Prayers (including invocation of the Spirit and words of institution and remembrances) were retained. The Our Father, the Communion service, the closing prayer, and the blessing also were preserved.

### **Changes**

Although many things remained the same, some changes were made, including use of the vernacular, shaking hands as a sign of peace, reciting a responsorial psalm after the first reading, and various responses to the priest. People were now permitted to receive the Eucharist in the hand or on the tongue and to stand while doing so. People were now offered the chalice as

well. Laity and religious began to serve as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, and married deacons were permitted to assist the priest at Mass and preach the homily. A new translation of the Mass texts is approved and needs a careful catechesis to prepare people for it. Pope Benedict XVI has approved the use of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass, popularly called the Latin Mass.

### **What Does the Eucharist Represent in the Life of the Church?**

It is the source and summit of all Christian life.

*In the Eucharist the sanctifying action of God in our regard and our worship of him reach their high point.*

*It contains the whole spiritual good of the Church, Christ himself, our Pasch. Communion with divine life and the unity of the People of God are both expressed and effected by the Eucharist.*

*Through the Eucharistic Celebration we are united already with the liturgy of heaven and we have a foretaste of eternal life. (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], question 274).*

### **Reference**

Rev. Alfred McBride, OPraem, *A Short History of the Mass* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006).

---

*Copyright © 2011, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.  
Permission is hereby granted to duplicate this work without adaptation for non-commercial use.*

*Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the New American Bible, copyright © 1991, 1986,  
and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC 20017 and are used by  
permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.*

*Excerpts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition, copyright © 2000, Libreria Editrice  
Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. Used with permission.  
All rights reserved.*

*Excerpts from Pope John Paul II, "Ecclesia de Eucharistia," copyright © 2003, Libreria Editrice Vaticana,  
Vatican City; "Dominicae cenae," copyright © 1980, LEV. Used with permission. All rights reserved.*

*Excerpts from the English translation of The Liturgy of the Hours © 1974, International Commission on  
English in the Liturgy Corporation (ICEL). All rights reserved.*