

# The Mass Begins

## Part II in the Parish Liturgy Series



We usually think of the Mass beginning with the gathering hymn and the sign of the cross. But in a practical sort of way we could say that the Mass begins when we leave our homes and make our way to the church. From the time we leave home our minds and hearts get redirected to what we are about to do at church. The first thing we ought to think about is for what we want to give thanks this day. We ought to consider as well what part of our lives we will place on the altar as an offering to God, joining ourselves to Christ in his offering to the Father. Pope John Paul II had this to say about our Sunday worship as a community: “The truth that the whole community shares in Christ’s sacrifice is especially evident in the Sunday gathering, which makes it possible to bring to the altar the week that has passed, with all its human burdens.” (Dies Domini, #43)

Our procession to the altar continues as we leave our cars and walk to the church. Upon entering the narthex or vestibule of the church it is appropriate to greet other worshippers in an act of hospitality which also acknowledges that we are about to do something together of immense importance. It is proper etiquette for Catholics to greet one another even if we do not know one another personally.

When we enter the church we sign ourselves with water from the baptismal font. In this simple gesture we remind ourselves that we come to worship as the one body of Christ, united with our brothers and sisters through baptism. The first ritual gesture that the Church imparted to us was when parents and godparents signed us on the forehead with the cross of Jesus on the day of our Baptism. Signing ourselves with the baptismal water now is a sign of renewal, accepting once again the gift of divine adoption. Sharing in the priestly identity of Jesus we are called to worship not as spectators but as active participants, celebrants of the great mysteries of our faith.

Ideally we have left our homes in sufficient time to take our places and quiet our minds and hearts in preparation for focusing on the Mass without all the distractions that might still be lingering in our thoughts. It’s not only good etiquette but respectful of others to be in place in plenty of time before Mass

begins.

We sing a Gathering Hymn that pulls our hearts and minds together into one unified body, the Church at prayer. We come as individuals but we pray as God’s Church with one voice. The Gathering Hymn usually gives a preview of what the focus of the readings might be or what special message the particular season or feast holds for us. The hymn is not background music but our first prayer. Read through a hymn text and see how its verses fit together into one message or one prayer that rises to God. If the hymn is posted on a sign board, read through the text before Mass begins as a preparation for praying the hymn. Don’t worry about the quality of your singing voice. Your voice is God’s gift; use it to praise God.

As we sing the Gathering Hymn, the priest and other ministers of the Mass move in procession to the altar. Although there are only a few in this procession we ought to see ourselves in this movement to the altar. If it were practical, we would all be in the procession, as in fact we are on Palm Sunday, the Easter Vigil and a few other occasions.

When the ministers approach the sanctuary they make a profound bow before the altar which is the sign of Christ present in our midst. So powerful is the image of the altar as Christ that current Church law prohibits additional altars in the same worship space. The priest and deacon reverence the altar with a kiss and take their places.

### Getting Ready for the Revised Missal

- How do you and your family prepare for Sunday Mass?
- Make a special effort next weekend to greet a fellow parishioner you don’t know.
- Read the First Letter of Peter 2: 4-5, 9-10 to learn about who we are in God’s eyes as we come into his presence to worship him.

© 2011 Fr. Ron Lewinski