

One Body in Christ: The Assembly at Mass

Based on The Worshipping Assembly at Mass, 2010, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



The celebration of Mass is an act of the whole assembly gathered for worship (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 34; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1144). We are a people of community, and we go together to God. Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical, *Spe salvi*, “no one is saved alone” (no. 48). For us as Christians this is important because what we do – not only at Mass – we do as a community. As St. Paul tells us in the First Letter to the Corinthians (12:12ff), we are, by our baptism, one Body in Christ, though many members, and each one of us serves the Body in our own special way.

For years, people have tried to define what liturgy is. Simply put, liturgy is an act of worship, an act of thanksgiving. It is *participation* in the Paschal Mystery of Christ – Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension – in union with the whole Church. If we see the Mass as merely the recitation of prescribed prayers and the execution of gestures, we really miss the point. Mass is so much more! Paragraph 11 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* tells us, “something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration.” We join the angels and the saints in proclaiming God’s praise. We gather with the whole Church across all time and space to adore the Lamb who conquered sin and death (CCC 1369-1370). We profess and celebrate the mystery of our faith. We enter into a love beyond all our understanding.

Because of our baptism, as paragraph 14 of the *Constitution* says, we have not only a right but also a duty to participate – fully, consciously, and actively – in the sacrifice of the Mass. We should be cautious, though, not to confuse participation with constantly doing something. By participating, we share in our part of the whole liturgy. Even by our presence, we “form one body, whether by hearing the word of God, or joining in prayers and liturgical song, or above all by offering the sacrifice together and sharing together in the Lord’s table” (GIRM, no. 96). To the extent that we are able to participate in this way, the work of redemption becomes personally effective for each of us. By such participation, the *General Instruction* says, we make the actions and prayers of the liturgy our own; we enter more fully into our personal communion with the Paschal Mystery of Christ and with one another (see no. 54, 55, etc.).

In the Mass, the Church is joined to the action of Christ, the High Priest. Earth unites with heaven on the altar. Together, through the hands of the priest, we offer the Divine Victim, we offer ourselves, and we offer one another. Under one faith and one baptism, as one Body in Christ, we give praise to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and at the same time, we are sanctified more and more by God (GIRM, no. 16). This act of praise lies at the center of the whole Christian life: its source and summit.

Because the whole liturgy is an act of the community there are certain parts of the Mass that are to be done by the whole assembly. Through these actions, the entire community joins itself to Christ in acknowledging the great things that God has done and in offering the sacrifice (GIRM, no. 78). These acts include:

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- Listening with reverence to the readings of God's word (GIRM no. 29);
- Engaging in the dialogue of prayer through acclamations, greetings, and responses (no. 34-37);
- Joining in an action through common postures and gestures (no. 42);
- Participating in communal silence (no. 45);
- Being included in the offering symbolized by incensation (no. 75);
- Participating in the greeting of peace as a sign of ecclesial communion and love for each other (no. 82);
- Participating in specific spoken prayers and other texts, namely:
 - the formula of general confession during the penitential rite (no. 51);
 - the profession of faith (no. 67-68);
 - the general intercessions (no. 69);
 - the Lord's Prayer (no. 81);
 - the prayer of humility before sacramental communion (no. 84);
- Participating in the offering during the Eucharistic Prayer, spoken by the priest, but in which all should join as the Church:
 - to offer the "spotless Victim to the Father in the Holy Spirit" and
 - to offer ourselves and so day by day to surrender, through Christ the Mediator, to an ever more complete union with God and with each other (no. 79f);
- Participating in liturgical song, because singing is a way of expressing both the communal nature of worship and the intense union to be achieved between God and the Church in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is a union so intense and total that it is described as a union between lovers whose nature is best expressed vocally in song (no. 39).
 - Singing is also an act which unifies and focuses the individual (no. 39), thus encouraging that "participation in body and spirit that is conscious, active, full, and motivated by faith, hope, and charity" (no. 18). These songs and acclamations are normally to be sung, in whole or in part, by all the participants:
 - opening liturgical song (no. 48);
 - Kyrie (no. 52);
 - Gloria (no. 53);
 - Responsorial psalm (no. 61);
 - Gospel acclamation (no. 62);
 - Song at the preparation of gifts (no. 74);
 - Sanctus, memorial acclamation, and Amen (no. 79, 151);
 - The Lord's Prayer (no. 81);
 - Lamb of God (no. 83);
 - the optional psalm, canticle of praise, or hymn after communion (no. 88).
- For those who are properly disposed (no. 80), full, active, and conscious participation is expressed by receiving Holy Communion, receiving in the one bread consecrated at this Mass the Lord's body and blood, in the same way that the apostles received them from Christ's own hands (no. 72.3).