
2007 PASTORAL LETTER: “ARE WE FINDING JESUS IN THE EUCHARIST?”

Christian faith first and foremost is based upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. St Paul spoke of the experience of early Christians when he proclaimed that the greatest of all possible human experiences is ‘that I may come to know Christ and the power of his resurrection’ [Philippians 3:10].

As there is a world of difference between just ‘knowing about’ someone and actually ‘knowing’ them, the same is true of Jesus Christ. To know him is quite different from knowing about him.

How can we get to know the Risen Christ?

We come to know others through personal experiences of them. And as we come to know them better, our faith in them can grow.

The same holds true of Christ. Through our personal experiences of him, we come to know him. And as we know him better, our faith in him grows.

Being risen, Jesus Christ is not a mere historical figure like Confucius or Buddha. He is alive today and with us. As he promised his Apostles [Matthew 28:20]:

I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.

How, then can we have personal experiences of Christ? There are many possibilities. The greatest of these is through the Eucharist. This is the subject of this booklet. It asks ‘Are we finding Jesus in the Eucharist?’

The booklet focuses mainly upon the experiences Jesus offers through the Eucharist, and then upon how the ritual of the Mass can help us enter into these experiences. Its structure is as follows:

- Jesus gave us the Eucharist during the Last Supper
- The First Experience of Jesus: Needs We Pray For Being Answered
- The Second Experience: Jesus Guiding Our Lives
- The Third Experience: Jesus Empowering Our Lives
- The Fourth Experience: Jesus Draws Us Into Greater Personal Intimacy
- The Ritual of The Mass
- Eucharistic Devotion outside Mass.

Jesus gave us the Eucharist during the Last supper

The night before he was crucified, Jesus gathered with his Apostles to celebrate the Jewish Passover ritual. This was no ordinary meal, but a ritualised sacrificial celebration.

According to most scripture scholars, perhaps the greatest surprise to the Apostles would have been Jesus’ wish to conduct a Passover ritual the night before it was normally celebrated [eg John 13:1; 18:28]. In doing so, Jesus planned to institute the greatest act of worship ever revealed by God.

The Jewish Passover

The Jewish Passover recalled God freeing their ancestors, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt around 1250BC. The climax of the ritual was the eating of a lamb that previously had been sacrificed to God. The Passover ritual was full of meaning.

It is recalled how God's angel 'passed over' the homes of the Israelites in Egypt whose doors were marked with the blood of a lamb. The angel had been sent to punish the Egyptians for ignoring God's demand that the Israelites be freed.

The Passover also recalled how, once they had been freed, God entered into a Covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, making them God's own people [Deuteronomy 7:6]:

For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your God; of all the peoples on earth, you have been chosen by Yahweh your God to be his own people.

Like the Last Supper, the Eucharist we celebrate today is no ordinary meal. It is a ritual sacrificial meal that is full of meaning. To think of the Eucharist simply as a meal is to completely misunderstand it.

The result will be to miss the experiences of himself that Jesus intends us to have through the Eucharist. It will be one reason why Catholics, particularly younger Catholics, will say 'I get nothing out of Mass. It is irrelevant to my life'.

Jesus institutes the Eucharist

One reason for the Apostles' surprise at Jesus' early celebration of the Passover meal would have been that there could be no sacrificial lamb. Lambs would not have been sacrificed until the next afternoon – when Jesus actually died [eg John 13:1, 18:28]. Jesus very deliberately substituted himself for the sacrificial lamb.

As we recall in the Mass today, Jesus changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood. Jesus then commanded his Apostles: 'Do this in memory of me'.

Ever since, down through the centuries, the Apostles, and those who succeeded them, bishops and priests, have continued to fulfil this command. As they have done so, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, has changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

The intention of Jesus for the Eucharist became ever clearer when, after the Last Supper, he went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He allowed himself to be arrested, to suffer and to be crucified at the hour of the lambs were being sacrificed for the Passover meal rituals being celebrated all over the city in the Temple in Jerusalem. Then he rose from the dead.

Finding Jesus in the Eucharist today

The Eucharist has the same basic structure as the Passover meal ritual. Jesus intends us to experience him in a different way through each structural element:

- being an act or worship, we experience any needs we pray for during the Eucharist being met
- through hearing the scriptures, we experience Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, guiding us in our daily lives
- through joining in his self sacrifice to the Father, we experience Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, empowering us gradually to rise above personal temptations, weaknesses and failings

-
- through our reception of him in Holy Communion, we experience Jesus drawing us into deeper personal relationship with himself. We also experience the spiritual within us being nourished, and growing stronger.

Some people find their experiences easier to 'get in touch with' than others. To take two examples, some people can readily recognise emotions and other inner moments. Others have come to recognise experiences only by looking back over their lives and noticing how things have worked out. Only later do they have moments of insight, realise they were strengthened or realise they were guided.

1. FIRST EXPERIENCE OF THE EUCHARIST: NEEDS WE PRAY FOR BEING ANSWERED

The Eucharist is the prayer of Jesus himself. As the prayer of the Son of God to God the Father, its power is infinitely beyond the power of the prayer of any human being. It is always granted.

Whenever we join in the celebration of the Eucharist, we join in the prayer of Jesus himself. He takes our prayers, and makes them his own. Our prayers for personal needs, or the needs of others, become his. They become the infinitely powerful as a result - and are always answered.

Through the Eucharist, Jesus fulfils in a special way his promises, such as: 'Ask, and you shall receive' 'Ask and you will receive, and so your joy will be complete' 'Whatever you ask for in my name, I will do' 'The Father will give you anything you ask of him in my name' [Matthew 7:7; John 16:24, 14:13, 15:16].

Because of its infinite power, Catholics down the centuries have joined in celebrations of the Eucharist at significant life moments – marriages, funerals, exams and many others. They have also asked priests to offer Masses for special intentions and anniversaries of those who have died.

When can we pray for needs?

The time the liturgy pauses in a Mass to allow us to express the needs we want Jesus to pray for is during the silence before the Opening Prayer – after the celebrant says: 'Let us pray'. He pauses to allow us to recall what we want to pray for during that Mass.

He then 'collects' all of our silent prayers in the more general opening prayer. This is why the opening prayer is sometimes called 'the collect'.

The Father grants the prayer of Jesus

As his Son, the prayers of Jesus are always granted by God the Father. This means that our prayers, which he has made his own, are granted. God will respond to the needs we expressed.

We realise that we have experienced the power of the Jesus' prayer through the Eucharist when we discover that our prayers for needs have been answered. Simpler needs may be answered quickly, others may take longer. Whether we pray daily also affects this.

Sometimes the causes of the needs we are aware of can be deeper needs. In this case, we may find the discovery of the deeper needs to be prayed for the first sign of our prayers being answered in the Mass. God never answers prayers in superficial ways.

Jesus taught that we need to be persistent in prayer, and not to give up [eg Luke 11:5-8]. Unless we persist, we may not discover the deeper needs we should pray for, and nothing will really change.

Do I prepare myself for Christ making my prayer his own?

What needs do I pray for in the Mass? What needs have I prayer for in the past?

*Lord, in this Mass, I ask you to make your own my prayers for
of my own needs...
the needs of others...
the needs of society...
the needs of the world...*

Three practical suggestion

The Mass is the climax of the Christian's prayer life. It builds upon personal prayer. However, without personal prayer, it can be hard to really pray in the Mass

Sometimes people say: 'I should pray more, but I just don't get the time.' In fact, people always have time for those they love. So no one lacks the time to pray daily – just sufficient love for Jesus himself.

Pray for needs – not solutions

Prayers we want Jesus to make his own in the Eucharist, ideally, should be for needs – not for solutions we may have in mind. The most effective prayer allows God to be God.

God knows the best way of meeting people's needs, and we need to trust. Jesus taught that, as a loving parent will never grant a child what is harmful, no matter how hard the child pleads, so God will never grant what is requested in prayer if this would be harmful, especially to the salvation of the one praying or of those for whom they are praying [Matthew 7:7-11].

So if we pray for solutions, and God knows that these would not be good for us or the one we are praying for, we will be disappointed. God will still answer the need, but we may be unable to recognise this answer if our hearts are set on a particular solution that God judges to be harmful.

Preparing before Mass

To enter into this experience of Christ in the Eucharist, we need to prepare ourselves beforehand. We need to call to mind the needs we want Jesus to make his own.

If we come to Mass with no particular prayer intentions in mind, we are denying ourselves this first experience of the Eucharist. We may even begin to say: 'I feel I get nothing from the Mass' – and even be tempted not to go.

Unfortunately, many people today think it normal to struggle through life on their own. They suffer in ways God wishes to help them avoid – and imagine this to be the norm.

2. SECOND EXPERIENCE: JESUS GUIDING OUR LIVES

There are many Gospel stories of people going to Jesus, seeking his guidance for their lives. They included the young, the old, the rich and the poor. They also included the powerful and the powerless, the multi-divorced and the remarried.

The second experience of Jesus in the Eucharist is that of him guiding us from within through the Holy Spirit. To the extent that we are genuinely seeking, we discover answers to our questions, solutions to our problems, insights into issues, and ways to move ahead after mistakes.

For teenagers, the issues may relate to self-understanding, what to do after leaving school, how to remain true to themselves in the face of peer expectations and pressures, or what to do after mistakes. For young adults, they may relate to direction in life, the secret to good relationships, or to life priorities within the pressures of today's world.

For married people, there may be questions related to their marriage relationship, to communication, to marriage pressures or to the renewal of married love. To parents, issues may relate to how to guide teenage children, and to their children's education.

To older people, the questions may relate to the purpose of suffering, the value of old age or to what happens after death. There are many other questions for all ages related to change and general life questions.

How do we seek guidance through the Eucharist: Liturgy of the Word

Whereas people in the gospels approached Jesus wherever he was at the time, today we approach him for guidance through the Liturgy of the Word. This is when we listen to the readings of scripture, asking ourselves the question: 'how does one or more of the ideas in the readings of this Mass relate to my life?'

So as we listen to the scripture readings during the Mass, and try to apply at least one of the main ideas to our lives, we open ourselves to the guidance of Jesus. If we do not do this, but instead keep thinking of our own issues, we are not open to Christ's guidance.

The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is very simple and focussed. Its centre is the proclamation of passages of scripture. Then there is the homily. Its purpose is to help us *relate the scripture to our lives*.

Obviously, the Liturgy of the Word will be experienced better if we have prepared ourselves to hear it beforehand. This involves two steps:

- calling to mind the current issues, questions, problems and areas of confusion in our lives about which we are seeking Christ's guidance.
- reading through the scripture readings slowly, at least a couple of times, noticing which ideas strike us, asking of at least one: 'How might this idea relate to my life?'

If the scripture readings in our parish are not well read, perhaps we could propose to the Priest or to the Parish Pastoral Council that the readings be presented in the parish newsletter so that we can follow them as they are being read. The most important thing is that we can take in the ideas in the readings; otherwise we won't have the experiences Jesus intends for us through the Word.

Many people today go through life confused about themselves, their relationships, the direction of their lives and so on. They imagine that confusion in life is normal.

Yet, there is another way – the guidance and help of Jesus. The Liturgy of the Word in Mass is one of the best ways to receive this.

Jesus responds with his guidance

People who face their life questions, and bring these to Mass to seek Jesus' guidance, find this as they reflect upon the readings and their lives. For some, the answer may come as a flash of insight, for others, they may realise that they have been guided only when they look back six months later. It all depends upon the questions or problems themselves, or whether deeper questions or issues needing to be addressed first.

It depends also upon whether they pray daily. For many, the guidance of Jesus comes gradually. Thoughts and feelings are stirred within as they take their life issues to Masses over time and as they pray. Eventually, these thoughts and feelings, like pieces of a jigsaw, come together – and we recognise the guidance of Christ.

Some brief background

When we meditate on ideas in the scriptures, we are pondering 'thoughts' of God, for the scriptures are the inspired word of God. God inspired writers to record in a variety of ways what God intended all to know. Key teachings needed to be expressed in more than one way.

God's love, for example, could not be conveyed simply in ordinary language, any more than human love can be. Therefore, it is presented in the Bible in other 'literary forms' as well – such as poetry, parable, song, dramatic stories, satire and love stories.

There is much to understand to fully appreciate the Word of God. The basic point, however, is that God's word expresses God's power – and we allow this power into our lives by trying to understand the teachings in the Word, and to apply them to our lives.

The challenge

Usually, as people reflect upon how the Word is calling them to live, areas in their lives come to mind where change will be a struggle. It is far from easy to be selfless if the readings call for greater love, to forgive, to love those we do not like, or to resist strong temptation.

These call us to confront our human weaknesses. We face the reality that we cannot change on our own. This opens us to seek the next experience of Jesus offers through the Mass – empowerment through the power of his resurrection.

Do I prepare myself for Christ's guidance?

What guidance for my life do I seek from Christ during Mass?

Do I go over the readings quietly beforehand, noticing which idea or ideas strike me because they relate to my life?

Lord, you seek to guide me through the Liturgy of the Word. Please help me with my

- *questions about...*
- *confusions...*
- *problems...*
- *life issues...*

Lord, help me to open myself to your guidance by listening to the readings of this Mass, and applying them to my life.

3. THIRD EXPERIENCE: JESUS EMPOWERING OUR LIVES

Jesus' resurrection from the dead revealed him to be divine, the Son of God. His power is greater even than death.

Death being the greatest of all human limitations, no other human failing or weakness is beyond this power of Christ. He shares it with all who accept Baptism, and who pray, worship and strive to live as he taught. It is the power he seeks to share through the Eucharist.

Possible effects in those who draw on this power

The power of Christ's resurrection is 're-creating'. To understand what this means, we need to remember that our human nature was created originally in the image and likeness of God. Our first parents had the potential to love and to do good, like God.

The Fall of our first parents, however, destroyed this nature as originally created. Selfishness, prejudices and vices became strong influences. Confusion, dominating emotions and weakness of will became typical characteristics of human behaviour.

The power of Christ's resurrection gradually and gently renews. It empowers us to 'rise above' the effects of the Fall. It makes all who draw upon it 'new creations' [eg 2 Corinthians 5:17]. Let us take a few practical examples.

A renewed mind

The power of Christ's resurrection helps us to 'rise above' the effects of the Fall on the human mind. We can think with 'new minds' [Romans 12:2]. To the extent that we allow this power into our lives, we come to see solutions to our confusions, problems and life questions more clearly.

The ways we see, think, speak and behave reflect more the love and goodness of Jesus. The influence of selfishness, judgementalness, resentments and prejudices on our thinking weakens.

Strengthens the will

The power of Christ's resurrection strengthens our wills, so that, gradually, we find it easier to do what is loving and good, like Jesus himself. Gradually we find it easier also to 'rise above' selfishness and temptations to do wrong. We can be more faithful to commitments and relationships, including life-long commitments such as to marriage, priesthood and religious life.

Spiritual renewal

Christ's power of resurrection renews the spiritual within us. God originally created the soul to harmonise all that is within us. However, as a result of the Fall, emotions can dominate the will; desires can undermine our efforts to follow what our consciences tell us is right; and we can find temptations hard to resist.

Christ's power renews the spiritual within us. To the extent that we draw on this power, we experience growing inner harmony. Inner conflicts and stresses decline.

And, as harmony grows within us, so does our harmony with others. Human experience teaches us that an angry person can make others angry. In the same way, people at peace with themselves tend to have peace-filled relationships. The quality of our relationships improves, and we become happier as individuals.

Inner healing

The power of Christ's resurrection also heals. Hurts that affect us from the past decline. Resentments weaken. We find ourselves capable of greater forgiveness.

This power also consoles, and comforts in times of grief. It brings a sense of 'wholeness', where previously we may have felt divided or 'conflicted'.

When can we open ourselves to Christ's power? The Eucharistic Sacrifice

Tragically, not all Catholics are able to participate in celebrations of the Eucharist each Sunday. Many can only participate in liturgies of the Word with Holy Communion. They cannot participate in the Eucharistic Sacrifice – the most central part of the Mass.

Though we can draw on Christ and the power of his resurrection through prayer and other ways, the greatest moment for doing so is through the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The word 'eucharist' means the 'good gift', for which we give thanks to God the Father. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is a thanksgiving sacrifice.

The word 'sacrifice' relates to Jesus, who offers himself in sacrifice to God the Father in every Mass. He once explained that his sacrifice included every moment of his life, not just his sufferings and death [John 6:38]:

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but to do the will of him who sent me.

What do we offer?

We participate actively in the Mass to the extent that we open ourselves to Christ and the power of his resurrection in two ways in the Eucharistic Prayer. These are:

- by thanking God for the blessings in our lives
- by offering our lives in self sacrifice, with Jesus.

The specific answers to these questions make up what I can offer in self sacrifice during the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The actual prayer of offering occurs after the bread and wine have been changed into his Body and Blood by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the moment of 'consecration' in the Mass [see *Catechism* 1353, 1377].

Jesus responds by empowering us

The power of Christ's resurrection raised him from the dead. It 'raises' us above the human weaknesses for which we seek it. We experience 're-creation'.

As we 'rise above' selfishness, temptations and the range of human weaknesses, our abilities to love and to do good gradually grow stronger. This improves our relationships, especially those of marriage, family life, friend and colleague.

We find we can see solutions to life questions and issues more clearly as our minds are renewed. We 'rise above' personal and social challenges to commitment, particularly to those mentioned earlier – marriage, priestly ministry and family life.

Personal hurts, perhaps caused long ago, are gradually healed. Grief, particularly at the death of a loved one, is consoled. Consolation brings inner peace in the face of trials and serious illness.

How quickly we have these experiences will depend upon factors such as whether we pray daily, and whether the causes of our need for renewal lie deeper. If they lie deeper, we will be led to see this over time.

Many remain trapped by their weaknesses

Sadly, many today who think Mass irrelevant imagine that their lives cannot change: that they have to suffer the consequences of hurts, selfishness, addictions and other weaknesses for the rest of their lives. They endure inner tensions, relationship problems and other problems as if there were no other way.

But there is the way of Christ, and empowerment by the power of his resurrection. The Eucharist is the greatest means for drawing on this power by offering our lives with Christ in self-sacrifice.

Do I open myself to Christ's power

For what do I thank God through the Mass?

What are the blessings for God in my life? Who loves me? Who supports me in times of need? What prayers can I see have been answered? What love and goodness can I see in myself, all of which reflect the influence of God? What good things have happened to me recently? Have there been any changes for the better? Have I experienced consolation in grief or help in difficulty? These are a few of many possible examples of the kinds of blessings for which we can give God thanks through the Eucharist.

What from my life do I offer in self sacrifice?

What of my daily work can I offer in the Eucharist? What prayers, efforts to share the gospel with other, especially family members, or marriage or family struggles can I offer? What household routines do I find tedious, or hardships or personal sufferings? What life hurts, struggles or difficulties? What struggles against temptations to do wrong?

Lord God: I give you thanks for your many blessings in my life...

I join Jesus in offering my whole life to you in self sacrifice especially...

FOURTH EXPERIENCE: JESUS DRAWS US INTO GROWING PERSONAL INTIMACY

The Eucharistic Sacrifice is completed when the celebrant receives Holy Communion. Then the worshipping community, led by the Deacon and other ministers around the altar, also receive Holy Communion. Jesus' intention here is clear from his words: 'Take and eat...' 'Take and drink...'

Jesus wants us to consume him so that he becomes, ever more deeply, *one* with us. In Jesus' words [John 6:56]:

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in that person.

Daily experience tells us too that we tend to be influenced by those who are close to us. They affect how we think, see and behave. The same is true of Jesus.

The promise of Holy Communion is greater personal intimacy in our relationship with Jesus. As this grows, so does his influences in our personal lives, and all the blessings that he gives.

How do we receive this intimacy during the Mass?

We receive the intimacy with Jesus that Holy Communion makes possible by receiving him *consciously* and *worthily*. This is the opposite of receiving him in a routine or thoughtless way, or unworthily.

One of the great misunderstandings in many today is that they have to receive Holy Communion if they go to Mass – and that there is no point in going to Mass if they cannot receive Holy Communion.

In fact, people can have the other three experiences of Jesus without receiving Holy Communion. We need to tell others this, lest misunderstanding lock them out of the Mass.

To receive consciously

To receive Holy Communion consciously means focussing upon the fact that we are receiving Jesus Christ himself – body, soul, divinity and humanity, the Son of God. Our thoughts need to reflect reverence and respect.

Jesus is no mere 'mate'. He is the Son of God who wants to be one with a creature. This is an awesome thought – but one we need to keep in mind. Otherwise we will fail to appreciate the tremendous love of Jesus for each of us.

To receive Jesus 'consciously' in Holy Communion requires that we believe we are receiving him – and that, during the Mass, he, with the Holy Spirit changed the bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

To receive worthily

To receive Jesus worthily, we need to be free of mortal sin – that is, the sin that results from *knowingly and freely breaking a grave law of God*. This is the 'deadly' sin that destroys a person's relationship with God [1 John 5:16]. It needs God's forgiveness, normally received through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We need to heed the warning of St Paul [1 Corinthians 11:27]:

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily is answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

Jesus responds to those receiving Holy Communion

Anyone who receives Jesus thoughtfully and worthily in the Eucharist finds him responding in many ways.

Drawn into personal communion

First, they find themselves drawn into deeper communion with him. 'Communion' means being one with another person at the deepest levels. It is far deeper than at the emotional level and 'feeling' close' – though we can have such feelings at times after receiving Holy Communion as well at times.

A human experience of communion is the deep oneness of a elderly happily married couple. Sometimes they know each other so well that they do not even have to ask each other what they think or feel.

As newly weds, their love perhaps revealed more passion and other emotions. However, as time went on, the emotions became less influential as their love became deeper and more spiritual. Each grew in the deep sense that they could not be 'whole' as a person without the other.

Communion between people is nourished only by selflessness and selfless love. This often requires commitment, no matter what. It has to be worked at. People have to break free of the 'what's in it for me' attitude.

Holy Communion can be emotionally satisfying – but mostly it brings deeper oneness with Christ. It is the sense that we cannot be 'whole' without him.

As communion with Jesus grows, so does our desire to share with him our most intimate concerns, secrets and fears. We can tell him anything. This is why people so often spend the period after receiving him in Holy Communion in silent prayer.

Spiritual strengthening

At a human level, the soul is the source of all that is spiritual within us – such as love, compassion, understanding and a sense of justice. The Eucharist nourishes all that is spiritual within us. Over time, it can change us.

At the supernatural level, we have received many divine gifts, especially through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Holy Orders. Unfortunately, many who have received these sacraments cannot draw on the help these gifts offer for their lives, partly because they have failed to nourish them sufficiently through the Eucharist.

Not all who have received the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, for example, have found them helpful in daily life. And not all who have received the Sacrament of Marriage have happy marriages.

Through Holy Communion, therefore, we are changed through the renewal that grows over time as the spiritual within us is nourished.

Christ's influence grows

As personal communion with Jesus grows, so does his power and influence within us. We are strengthened to resist temptations. The spiritual weaknesses that sin causes are remedied. We are empowered to resist temptations to mortal sin.

Jesus had a special love for the poor, so those who receive Holy Communion consciously and worthily find, over time, their concern and commitment for all who are in need growing. Their love

for others who follow Christ also grows, as does their dismay at the conflicting beliefs and moral teachings that divide Christian churches.

Do I open myself to intimacy with Christ?

How do I prepare to receive Jesus consciously and worthily?

Are there any of my most intimate and secret questions, concerns and fears that I do not share with him?

Lord Jesus, please help me to receive you consciously and worthily in this Mass so that our relationship will grow ever more personal and intimate.

The Mass

Much more could be said about the experiences of Jesus that he gives through the Mass. These are only basic ideas.

Now, however, we need to turn to the Mass itself. We need to see how the Rite of the Mass can help us to participate actively, and to have the experiences of Jesus that he wishes for us.

B. THE RITUAL OF THE MASS

The basic purpose of the ritual of the Eucharist is to help people enter into four the experiences Jesus offers. Its aim is to help them participate *actively*.

There are two main parts to the Mass. These are the *Liturgy of the Word* and the *Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice*. Each has a preparatory rite. For the Word, it is the *Preparatory Rite*. For the Eucharistic Sacrifice, it is the *Preparation of the Gifts*.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice is completed by the priest receiving Holy Communion. After this, ideally, all who are able to do so in the congregation will also receive Holy Communion.

The role of the celebrant

Priests share in the spiritual powers Jesus first gave to the Apostles. Through the priest, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, changes bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

Through the priest, Jesus also guides the congregation through prepared hearts as the priest helps them to relate the teachings of Jesus to their daily lives. Through the priest, Jesus prays on behalf of the Church community.

The priest is dressed during the Mass in special garments, called 'vestments'. They help us focus upon the fact that Christ works through him in the Mass – and helps us focus upon the priest less as a personality. This is particularly important for anyone who may disagree with the priest as a person, or even dislike him.

White vestments are used in seasons of special joy, such as Christmas and Easter. Green vestments are the colour associated with hope, and are used most Sundays of the year. Purple, the colour of repentance, is used in the periods before Christmas (Advent) and Easter (Lent). Red reflects fire or blood, and is used for Masses of the Holy Spirit or martyrs.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

A 'good celebration' of the Mass helps us to open our hearts to the four basic experiences Jesus offers through the Eucharist. Its basic structure revolves around helping us to do so by participating actively in the celebration.

1. OFFERING PRAYERS FOR JESUS TO MAKE HIS OWN

The ritual of the Mass helps us to do this by helping us to focus upon the presence of Jesus in two ways. These are

- the *Introductory Rites*
- the *Opening Prayer* (or Collect)

Introductory Rites

The introductory rites focus upon the God of overwhelming love, the God who wants to help us in so many ways. They help us also to leave aside our normal activities and busy lives to focus upon the spiritual presence among them of Jesus, who said, 'where two or three gather in my name, I will be present with them' [Matthew 18:20].

Opening hymn

The purpose of this hymn is to unify the congregation, directing their minds to what they are going to do together.

The celebrant kisses the altar

The celebrant kisses the altar when he enters the sanctuary. The kiss is the greatest sign of ritual honour and respect. The priest kisses the altar to honour the sacredness of the altar and Christ's sacrifice.

Some decades ago, the relics of saints were preserved on the altar. People came to think, mistakenly, that the altar was kissed as a sign of respect for the saints. Now, however, while relics may be sometimes in the base of altars, they are no longer placed on the top.

The Penitential Rite

The focus of this rite is the infinite love of God. In human experience, forgiveness is perhaps the most difficult way to show love.

Usually a Mass begins with the Penitential Rite, which seeks God's forgiveness for our wrong doing. In this way, the Mass recalls from the start the love of the God we worship in the Eucharist.

The Gloria

The community prayer, 'Glory to God in the highest', is proclaimed by all, except during the seasons of Advent and Lent. The Gloria praises the God who loves and forgives.

The Opening Prayer (or Collect)

The Opening Prayer focuses our attention upon personal prayers we want Jesus to make his own. The celebrant begins '*Let us pray*', and then pauses for a few moments to allow us to think silently of all that we want to pray for in the Mass.

After the pause, the celebrant prays for a general intention of the whole community – the 'collect', which embraces the personal prayers of every participant.

2. HELPING US LISTEN FOR CHRIST'S GUIDANCE: LITURGY OF THE WORD

During the Last Supper Passover meal, God's salvation of the Israelites from slavery was recalled by the reading of a section of the Word of God. During the Mass, in the Liturgy of the Word, sections of the Word of God are read. Each relates in some way to the story of Christian salvation by Jesus Christ.

During the Last Supper, psalms were sung [Mark 14:26]. During the Mass, the Responsorial Psalm is an integral element in the Liturgy of the Word.

As mentioned earlier, we open ourselves to experiences of Christ guiding us in our lives by listening to the Word of God, asking ourselves: 'How does this relate to my life?' We aim, as Jesus said, to 'hear the word of God and put it into practice' [Luke 8:21].

The Liturgy of the Word

The focus of this liturgy is to help us relate God's Word to our lives. God's Word is proclaimed through scripture readings, and helping us to relate the readings to our lives is the purpose of the rest of this liturgy.

The reading of the Scriptures

Depending on the solemnity of the Mass, there are one or two readings before the Gospel. The Responsorial Psalm follows the First Reading. The climax of this liturgy is the Gospel itself, which is about some aspect of the salvation ministry of Jesus himself.

Jesus is present spiritually when people read or hear the scriptures. For this reason, the priest or deacon kisses the Gospel after proclaiming it.

The homily

The celebrant of the Mass, or a Deacon, then gives a homily on Sundays and major feasts. Its purpose is to help all to reflect to discover how the Word of God relates to their daily lives.

This may involve first explaining the Gospel teaching, or that of the preceding readings that lead to it, and then suggesting ways the teaching may relate to daily life. Over the course of a year, the preacher also explains the basic Catholic beliefs that are drawn from the scriptures, for these help us to understand better how the readings relate to our lives.

Homilies are not academic talks, or abstract discussions unrelated to daily life – though people sometimes seem to expect this. The homily will always be scripture centred and life focussed. It is prepared with the faith needs of the people in mind.

The Creed

On Sundays and major feasts, the community responds to the scriptures and homily's call for greater personal conversion by proclaiming the Creed. This recalls the basic beliefs of Christian faith that, like street signs, point to the ways Jesus revealed that his followers can have experiences of God.

The Creed cannot achieve its real purpose if the community 'rattles off' its words at a pace so rapid that it does not allow thought.

Prayer of the Faithful

This concludes the Liturgy of the Word. Its intentions including the needs of the Church, the world, the oppressed and needy, the local community and the deceased. This is another time when we can reflect upon our personal prayers, which we want Jesus to make his own.

The priests, acting in the name of Jesus, the Head of the Community whose prayer is the Mass, opens and closes the Prayer of the Faithful.

3. OPENING OURSELVES TO CHRIST AND HIS POWER: LITURGY OF THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

The Jewish Passover involved the sacrifice of a lamb. As mentioned earlier, during the Last Supper Jesus substituted the lamb with himself. Henceforth, *he* would be the thanksgiving sacrifice offered to God the Father for the salvation of the human race. This is celebrated in the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice – the central part of the Mass.

The focus of this liturgy is giving thanks for all God's blessing. In this context, we offer our lives with Jesus in his thanksgiving sacrifice.

Preparation of the gifts

This part of the Mass prepares for the Eucharistic sacrifice, helping us to focus upon our need to thank God for the many blessings in our lives. First, the altar is prepared by the necessary vessels and coverings being placed on the altar. There is the Chalice, which will contain the wine; the Paten, upon which the bread is placed; the Ciborium, which contains the many breads to be consecrated, and which will be distributed in Holy Communion.

Gifts of bread and wine, used by Jesus in the Last Supper, then are usually presented to the celebrant by members of the congregation. The celebrant thanks God for these gifts, which come from God's own creation. Commonly, also, a collection is held at this part of the Mass as a means for people to be part of the offering.

Sometimes, the altar and gifts are then increased. The rising smoke symbolises prayers being raised to God.

The priest then washes his hands as a sign of his desire for inner purification. The Preparation of the Gifts concludes with the congregation praying that the blest gifts will be acceptable to God, and the priest saying a final *Prayer over the Gifts*.

The Eucharistic Prayer

This prayer is the climax and heart of the whole Mass. It begins with the *Preface*, and concludes with the *Great Amen*.

The Preface

The purpose of the preface is to recall one of three general aspects of Christ's salvation of the human race – creation; Christ's suffering, death and resurrection; or Christ's saving actions, and how can we experience salvation today. The Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of thanks, beginning with words such as: 'Father, all powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks...'

After the aspect of Christ's salvation being recalled has been proclaimed by the celebrant, the community join in with the words:

'Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blest is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest.'

The first of these phrases come from the scripted image of heaven, where those who are now with God give praise [Revelation 4:8]. It reminds us that the Eucharist is a prayer for the dead as well as the living.

The second of these phrases is based upon the acclamation the people made to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem prior to the Last Supper and his death [Matthew 21:9]. They remind us that, through the Mass, we join those in heaven in our worship.

The Eucharistic Prayer

The central moment of this Prayer is the 'Consecration'. This is when Jesus and the Holy Spirit change the bread and wine into his Body and Blood as the celebrant(s) 'Do this in memory of me' by repeating his institution of the Eucharist.

The 'Real Presence'

During the Consecration, Jesus becomes present in a way that is different from all others. Other ways Jesus is present, such as in the community, the Scriptures or the priest, are spiritual and passing. Under the focus of bread and wine, Jesus is present permanently – body and blood, human and divine.

This is referred to as the 'real presence' – not the sense that his spiritual presences in the community, in the priest and in the Word are not real – but in the sense that he is fully present, not just spiritually. And, unlike his passing spiritual presences, he is present under the appearances of bread and wine for so long as they remain bread and wine.

The elements of the Eucharistic Prayer

There are four elements to every Eucharistic Prayer. These are:

- the *invocation of the Holy Spirit*, which prays that the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, will come down upon the bread and wine to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ;
- the *Institution Narrative*, which repeats the actions of Jesus, doing this 'in memory' of him. During this narrative, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into his Body and Blood. He is present, offering himself in sacrifice to God his Father;
- the *Prayer of Sacrifice*, when Jesus, present under the appearances of bread and wine, is offered in sacrifice to God the Father. This is the best moment for us to join our lives with his, offering them so as to draw on the power of his Resurrection;

- the *Intercessions*, which are for the same intentions across the whole Church – for the people of God, the pastors of the Church, those present at the Mass and those who have died.

The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with the Priest(s) proclaiming that the Eucharistic Prayer is prayed through Christ:

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour are yours, almighty Father, forever and ever.

The Deacon leads the congregation in the response, which is called the Great ‘Amen’.

The Great ‘Amen’

The word ‘Amen’ means ‘Let it be’ or ‘So be it’. From ancient times, this has been a solemn or ‘great’ movement in the ritual.

The whole community – Deacons, acolytes, servers and everyone present – affirms all that has been prayed and happened. Often the ‘Amen’ is sung to emphasise its importance.

4. OPENING OURSELVES TO PERSONAL INTIMACY WITH JESUS

Communion with the Lord cannot be a private devotion. Intimacy with Jesus has a communal dimension, for closeness with him means closeness also with others who are one with him.

The Communion Rite expresses this through

- the Lord’s Prayer, which begins ‘*Our Father*’
- the prayer for peace (which usually includes the optional Sign of Peace)
- the Breaking of the Bread, symbolising the reception of Communion by all from the one bread (even though, for practical purposes, many additional small hosts are distributed in Holy Communion)
- the Reception of Holy Communion by the Priest(s), which completes the Eucharistic sacrifice
- the Reception of Holy Communion by the congregation, led by the Deacon, acolytes and other ministers in the sanctuary.

The Priests’ Communion

The Eucharistic Sacrifice of Christ is completed when the Celebrant, in ‘the Person of Christ’, receives Holy Communion. This completes Christ’s self offering to his Father.

After the Sacrifice of Christ has been completed by the celebrant, the Deacon, servers, other ministers and the congregation receive Holy Communion. Sometimes people wonder why others do not receive Holy Communion with the Celebrant. The reason is, as explained already, the Eucharist is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and is completed by him through the Priest.

The Communion of the Congregation

The act of receiving Holy Communion is a statement. It states that a person:

- believes they are receiving Christ himself, under the appearances of bread and wine
- they are free of mortal Sin, which breaks relationship with him

-
- they are one in faith with the beliefs of the worshipping community.

St Paul warned against receiving Holy Communion unworthily [1 Corinthians 11:29]:

Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily is answerable for the body and the blood of the Lord.

For those who cannot receive Holy Communion

There is a mistaken idea these days that there is no point to going to Mass if one cannot receive Holy Communion. This not correct. While someone may not be able to receive Holy Communion because they have not yet repented disobeying a grave law of God, or because they do not fully believe all that Catholic faith believes, they can still seek Jesus through the other ways he can be experienced in the Mass. He will still make their prayers his own; guide them; empower them to the extent that they are personally converted to him.

Receiving a blessing

People who participate in the Mass, but who cannot receive Holy Communion, are always encouraged to approach the priest for a blessing by crossing their arms across their chests.

Post Communion Prayer: The Mass concludes

After Holy Communion, there is usually a period of reflection. This may be a hymn or a silent period for prayer.

The Mass then is completed with the *Post Communion Prayer*.

Concluding Rite

After the Mass has been completed, notices may be read out if they are not already in a newsletter – or perhaps a notice in the newsletter needs to be emphasised.

The Final Blessing

The Mass concludes with the celebrant blessing all present. He then bids them to return to their daily lives to live the Christian mission in the world.

Usually the final act by the community is a recessional hymn.

THE NEED FOR PERSONAL PREPARATION

Whether or not we experience the Mass as Jesus intends depends very largely upon how we prepare. This includes focussing upon the questions:

- what personal prayers do we want Jesus to make his own?
- where in our lives we seek his guidance?
- how do the teaching(s) of the scriptures to be used in the Mass relate to our lives?
- for what are we giving thanks to God through the Eucharist?
- what from our lives we intend offering with Jesus to God the Father?

EUCCHARISTIC DEVOTION OUTSIDE MASS

In early Church times, consecrated breads (or hosts) which had not been received in Holy Communion were reserved. The purpose was that Holy Communion could be available to the sick and dying, and to prisoners (especially those persecuted for the faith). The reserved hosts came to be called the *Blessed Sacrament*.

Before long, Christians realised that they could approach Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament, as did people in the gospels. In the gospels we read of him being approached by children, the young, adults and the elderly; by parents, the influential, the needy and the sick; by those with searching questions, prostitutes, social rejects and those thought to be 'evil'.

People went to him for healing, for guidance, and for advice. They sought freedom from whatever was crippling their lives, from guilt and from whatever was dominating or possessing them.

Like those in the gospels, we can approach Jesus today in the Blessed Sacrament in our churches. We can put before him our needs, troubles, hurts, problems – the whole of our lives.

We can go to him with our marriage and family issues, our relationship questions, the fears caused by peer pressures, and when we feel no one else understands or accepts us for who we are. Sometimes, we come to appreciate worshipping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament most when we go to him in times of loneliness, sickness, hurt and despair. We may simply be with him in silence, and gradually find his consolation, peace and healing.

Only to be experienced

No one can talk another into seeking Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament. A person can only know the effect of praying before the Blessed Sacrament from personal experience. All we can do is invite and encourage others to open themselves to Jesus in this way – and leave the rest to him.

Other forms of Eucharistic devotion include Holy Hours, Benediction and processions.

Conclusion

The Eucharist, being Christ himself, can never be completely grasped. This booklet does not even seek to present all of Catholic teaching and insights.

Its sole focus has been basic ideas on finding Jesus in the Eucharist. May we all open ourselves more fully to the experiences of himself Jesus offers us – so that we can know him more personally, and grow closer to live in faith.