

Praying the Mass

(I'm going to use the word Mass, because it's the one I'm used to. If Eucharist is the word you use, please don't be concerned: it is the same thing!)

When I was a small boy, going to Mass was very different from today. The devout were on their knees from the start, and they spent the time saying their rosaries, pausing to recite the Gloria in Excelsis and the Creed, and possibly the Sanctus and Benedictus and the Agnus Dei. They received the celebrant's blessing at the end, and went home, their Sunday duty satisfied. They didn't receive Communion, nor take much notice of what the priest was doing, which was in Latin, or if it wasn't, the Canon was said silently. That of course was in Roman Catholic and some High Anglican churches.

The "Low" churches (the term "evangelical" was not in common use then) probably had the Lord's Supper once a quarter, often as an add-on to the "main service", which was mainly taken up with a sermon and lengthy made-up prayers.

In 1937, a collection of essays called *The Parish Communion* was published. At first it made little impression, and it was not until about 1955 that *The Parish Communion*, usually at the "sacred hour" of 9.30am, began to be common. There were a (very) few exceptions, mainly in London, Birmingham and Manchester, where Anglo-Catholic (as we called it) faith and practice had been enthusiastically taught and received.

Most church of England churches had a said communion, usually at 8 o'clock, not necessarily every Sunday. When I was confirmed in 1960 the service was not a eucharist. I had to go the following Sunday morning to make my first communion. It was not until I went up to University that I found a parish communion, sung, with "setting" and hymns. What a revelation that was!

Nowadays of course the eucharist reigns supreme as the typical form of common worship in the Church of England. What we do with it is another matter. In the Catholic tradition too, post-Vatican II, parish mass with general communion, using modern translations, is almost universal. The eucharist has become our "common worship", except in extreme Protestant parishes, which still prefer word to action.

I want now to turn for a moment to Scripture, specifically to the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer uses Chapter 11 to remind his hearers of the faith of the ancient Patriarchs of Israel, then in Ch 12, turns to Jesus as their contemporary model, exhorting them to holiness, and placing before them the image of God's appearance on Mount Horeb, with terrifying phenomena, fire, darkness, tempest, and the sound of a trumpet. Then he says,

but what you have come to is Mount Sion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal robes, to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, to God who is judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect and to Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant and the scattered blood that speaks more eloquently than Abel's. See that you do not refuse him!

And suddenly, we realise that it is the worship of his hearers which is being described. They are in the

presence of God, in heaven; nothing less (and there is nothing more). This is *our* eucharist—this is what Mass is. We too are in heaven: not of course a physical place but a spiritual state outside the limits of time and space. When we come to Mass, that is where we are.

It may not always be very easy to realize this, for most if not all churches now have so much extraneous activity before, after and even during the service that it can feel more like some sort of social club. Worship can seem almost a minor part of the action, what with putting out books, and music playing, checking lists and rotas and getting things ready for the refreshments afterwards, and in some churches (mercifully not usually in our tradition) big screens so you'd think you were going to see a film.

We should remind ourselves: we have not come to Sunday Mass or Eucharist to involve ourselves in a social gathering; or even to meet our friends! We've come to meet God! As Hebrews expresses it, we've come for a little while to *heaven*! The rest, however much part of our routine, is *and must be*, subordinate to that.

Imagine you have been invited to Buckingham Palace, to a royal Garden Party. For all I know, some of you may have been to one. Her Majesty invites all kinds of people, even one or two of my brothers. You make careful preparations for such a special occasion: get your hair done, buy new clothes or at least make sure your best is presentable. Check that you've got your invitation, without which you won't get through the gates. Make sure you are there in good time. And that if the Queen or Duke should happen to speak to you, you know the correct way to respond, and have prepared something to say to the famous question "And what do *you* do?" Coming to church "to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" is surely far more important than that. Yet how carelessly we prepare for it, and how casually we often behave.

Praying the Mass or Eucharist should begin before we set out for church. Ideally, the night before, we should read through the readings for the Sunday, or at the least the Gospel. We should be aware of the "theme" of the Sunday, for two of the readings at least are intended to share a topic, sometimes all three. And read the Collect, the theme prayer of the day, so that we know to where our thoughts should be directed. We should remind ourselves of any particular thing we wish to pray for, any persons (including ourselves) whom we wish to commend to God's care. It should of course go without saying that we have also examined our conscience, and asked God's forgiveness for any sins and failings we discover, long before that brief and formal acknowledgement of sin in the Mass itself. There is more; but those essentials will provide a beginning.

One of the churches I used to serve in had a big notice in the porch: "Talk to God before the service, and your friends afterwards!" It was, I'm sorry to say, more honoured in the breach than in the observance. But it is right! The few minutes before the Mass begins should be used to recollect ourselves, reminding ourselves, not necessarily explicitly, but in general terms, of what we are in church for, that we are indeed among "the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven" (Hebrews again) and that we have come to Jesus, and specifically to join ourselves with him in the sacrifice of his body and blood, feeding on him and thus uniting ourselves as one body with him in his offering to the Father, so that it becomes our sacrifice, too. I wish more of our churches had a short silence for recollection, a minute or two, when everything, including the organ, stopped, immediately

before the bell rings for the start of worship.

I'm going to risk confusing you now, but it can't be helped. For I need to tell you, or remind you, that the Mass is really *not* something *said*, but something *done*. This truth was used as a rationalisation when Mass was said in Latin: the people didn't need to understand the words, it's what was *done* that mattered. The second part of that statement is true: it is what's done that matters, but that's no reason why people should not understand the words, too. The Mass has been called "a sacred drama" and there's truth in that too, provided we don't try to attach significance to every little detail. Some things are done for purely practical reasons, and don't need to be embroidered with imaginative meanings they haven't got!

We Anglicans (and our Roman Catholic brethren have recently caught the bug) have always tended to think we worship God with our minds or spirits, perhaps because we read "God is spirit, and they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth" and take that as the last word on the matter.

But in fact, humans are not pure spirit (if we were, we'd be angels!), we are body, mind and spirit, and that Trinity is as inseparable as the Holy and Blessed Trinity itself. We don't worship only with our minds and spirits—because we can't. S. Paul urged the Christians at Corinth to "Glorify God in your bodies (I Cor 6:20). We must worship with our bodies as well as our spirits, so long as we are in them, that is, as long as we live. The two are inseparable. Remember that it is a fundamental belief for Christians that God, pure spirit, chose to take flesh and to be born as a human. So the Mass is an action, something done, and clothed in words, just as we, with Our Lord, are spirits clothed in flesh. Physical gestures, bowing, making the sign of the cross, genuflecting, kneeling, raising our eyes in adoration, can all add to our devotion, and I particularly regret that in the past few years the practice of kneeling for certain parts of the service has virtually disappeared and we sit firmly like Methodists on our bottoms! How many of these gestures we use is a matter for each of us, and they can be overdone. But in moderation, they can certainly help us pray the Mass.

The bell rings. We begin with the Entrance Chant, words either taken from Scripture or suitably composed for the season or festival we are celebrating. It should be sung. In practice, in many churches we find a hymn instead, which is perfectly permissible, though not always so carefully chosen as the Introit (to use the old-fashioned term for Entrance Chant) to suit the occasion. We sing that, and of course singing involves our bodies as well as minds. Saint Augustine of Hippo remarked that "he who sings prays twice". And this sets the pattern for the whole of our worship: words and action complementing one another throughout. And when the words are said by the celebrant or another minister alone, and not by all of us, we still should be listening attentively to what is being said, making the prayer our own, and not just letting it happen while our minds are elsewhere. We need to engage with the words, whether we are joining together in saying them aloud, or hearing one of the ministers speak them on our behalf. And we should be sure to make our responses *audibly*! It is disconcerting to say the least for a celebrant to greet the people *The Lord be with you!* and hear no response.

The sacred minister or ministers and servers having entered, the altar may be censed. The Revelation to S. John tells us that incense represents the prayers of the saints (that is, not those holy people we have acclaimed as saints, but ourselves: saints in the sense that S. Paul uses the term to the churches he

writes to: God's people). To most people, the sweet scent of incense seems to convey a sense of the sacred, and of course in the worship of the Jewish Temple it was one of the sacrificial offerings. It was also used to purify and sanctify, and that is how we use it at Mass. The altar is sanctified as the place where Christ will be recalled, and later at the offertory, the bread and wine, the celebrant and ourselves all should be censured, as a symbol of our purification, so that we may be more worthy to approach the Holy of Holies, God himself, when the sacrament has been consecrated.

But before then, we acknowledge our sinfulness, either in the words of the confession, or in the shorter response form, merging with the Kyrie eleison, Lord, have mercy. Either way, we are not making a confession of any actual sin; that belongs elsewhere, in the sacrament of reconciliation or absolution. Here, we are simply admitting the fact that we have sinned, and pleading God's mercy to forgive. Again, we must speak audibly. It's a public statement.

Gloria in Excelsis, Glory to God in the Highest, is an ancient hymn, possibly written in the second century, in praise of the Holy Trinity. When we sing or say that together, we not only offer our own praise of our Creator and Redeemer, we join ourselves with the myriads of faithful Christians who have glorified God in these same words for nearly 2000 years. We are one with them, Christ's redeemed, his chosen ones, his holy people; we are joined with them, even though we may be only a few, gathered in our own church of St Whoever. We are not alone.

Then the celebrant sings or says the Collect, the theme prayer for the Sunday and indeed through the coming week, unless there is a commemoration of a saint. He offers it on our behalf: at this stage the priest is acting for us, our representative or advocate, taking our prayers to God. We should join (mentally) with him in the Collect, making its words our own, and responding firmly, Amen. We have begun to pray the Mass.

Next we sit for the readings from Scripture. It's easy at this point just to relax, let the words wash over us. Sometimes they aren't very well read. But if we have already read them at home, we'll know what they are about, and most churches (surprisingly, not all) include the texts in the service leaflet for the day. Like the Collect, they are chosen to express a particular theme. They are a resource for prayer, and may properly provide us with material for contemplation both during Mass itself and afterwards, during the week, sitting in our memories and occasionally popping into consciousness. That too is part of praying the Mass.

On Sundays and holy days, there is usually a homily or sermon, perhaps taking up a theme from the readings, or maybe addressing some other matter of current concern. That too may provoke our thought and meditation.

Afterwards, we proclaim our faith in the words of the creed. Again, it is easy simply to recite this formula without attending to the meaning of the words. Do we in fact understand them? They are not most straightforwardly expressed, for they deal with mystery and profound theology, some of which was hugely controversial at the time the credal statement was compiled, but which may *seem* less than relevant to us today. Actually, it's not. It is statements of this kind which define the essentials of our faith, and taken seriously, can guard us from error in our thinking and belief. If there is anything in the Creed whose meaning is not clear, it should be a priority to find out just what does mean, if we are

serious about our faith.

And finally in the first part of our worship, our prayers of intercession. I will say only this: *God* does not need to be told about events, situations, anxieties, disasters or even our feelings. He knows already. We make these prayers because of *our* need to express them and share them. That is our human nature. It is God's nature to respond before we have even articulated our concerns. We make them our own prayers by listening with attention, and responding with sincerity. And if there is a silence for our personal petitions, we may add those too. Finally, in many churches, we commend ourselves to the prayers of Our Lady, as we might of any Christian friend, as we say "Hail Mary".

In most Anglican churches, the first part of Mass concludes with the Peace.

Though the Peace is very ancient (St Justin Martyr in mentions its being given about 160AD) in its present form it is the newest part of the mass and in some ways, I feel, the less said about it, the better! It was introduced in the form we now have in the first Roman version of the Mass in English, in about 1970. Its origin is in the greeting, *after* the consecration of the sacred elements and recitation of Our Father, which the celebrant gave to any other clergy present. It may be seen as symbolising the greeting of Christ to his apostles (the Celebrant standing for Christ, and the other clergy, the apostles).

I have to say that as it is done in almost all the churches I've ever worshipped in, it's not at all what it was intended to be. The instruction introducing the ceremony says "It is appropriate that each one give the sign of peace only to those who are nearest and in a sober manner." In practice, exchanged after the intercessions and before the preparation of the altar, it has been torn from its context and degenerated into a kind of free-for-all how-d'ye-do and an opportunity to pass messages and even exchange news and gossip or visit the loo. In many churches, at the peace one half expects the appearance of an usherette with popcorn and ice-cream. For it resembles an interval in the entertainment and a distraction. That is not what the Kiss of Peace should be.

St Augustine of Hippo says in one of his sermons

Then, after the consecration of the Holy Sacrifice of God, because He wished us also to be His sacrifice, a fact which was made clear when the Holy Sacrifice was first instituted, and because that Sacrifice is a sign of what we are, 'Peace be with you' is said, and the Christians embrace one another with the holy kiss. This is a sign of peace; as the lips indicate, let peace be made in your conscience.

It is then the sign of Christ's forgiveness, reuniting sinners with himself. It should be exchanged with a certain solemnity, as of Christ greeting his disciples.

Now, we come to the preparation of the altar and the elements of bread and wine for the second part of our worship. A hymn is customarily sung, except at said Mass, and alms may be collected. They are not "the offertory" That is the bread and wine presented to the celebrant to be consecrated as the Body and Blood of Our Blessed Lord. Unfortunately, the hymn singing generally renders the prayers said at this point inaudible, which is a pity. They are beautiful and significant, and are modelled on the ancient Jewish prayers prescribed for the Passover meal:

Blessed are you Lord, God of all Creation, for through your goodness we have this bread (wine) to

offer, fruit of the earth (vine) and work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life (our spiritual drink). Now we are getting down to it! As he says these prayers, the celebrant, so to say, reverses his role.

Now, rather than acting for us, our representative, leading our people's prayers, by virtue of his ordination he enacts the role of Our Lord himself, doing as he did, saying what he said, recalling the events of that Passover celebration in the Upper Room to make them present for us.

The Preface, sung (or said) by the Celebrant alone, recounts Christ's saving action and its conclusion: "with Angels and Archangels, with all the hosts and powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your eternal glory, as everlastingly we proclaim: Holy, holy, holy &c." reminds us again that we are in God's presence. Isaiah's vision of heaven (Ch 6) is the source of those words and confirms that we are indeed in eternity, in heaven.

The Eucharistic Prayer, in technical language the Canon, continues, praising God, recounting his saving actions and including the words by which at the Last supper the Lord identified the elements of bread and wine with his imminent sacrifice upon the Cross: this is my Body; this is my Blood. Do this ... and as the church ever since has done, so we do; and adore the Saviour in his sacramental presence. Like Isaiah, we too, though unclean, have seen the Lord in his holy temple.

Though we speak of "offering the sacrifice of the Mass" Christ's sacrifice is not repeated, for that offering was made once and for all time. In fact, because that is an eternal offering, outside time and space, we are so to say tuning into something which exists for all time and for eternity, uniting ourselves with Our Blessed Lord's offering so that it becomes ours as well. Our Lord in his suffering upon the Cross, prayed to his Father. We have only fragments of his prayer, the so-called Seven Last Words, but they are sufficient to tell us that he continued to intercede for us all, even those who had put him to such suffering:

'Father; forgive them, for they know not what they do.' 'I say to you, this day you shall be with me in Paradise.' 'Woman, behold your son ... Behold your mother.' And his humanity is confirmed 'I thirst.' 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' and finally 'It is accomplished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' He delivers Himself into the hands of men, body and blood, soul and divinity – all that He is. So, as you receive Him in Holy Communion, take him to yourself. Unite yourself with him. Pray never to be unfaithful nor to part from him. He will never leave you.

Christ in the Blessed Sacrament places himself into our hands for us to eat and drink of his life's offering. We in turn place ourselves into his hands, to do with us as he pleases, which is of course for our eternal salvation. In so doing we participate in his perfect sacrifice, and it avails for us too, and for all his faithful people.

How do we respond? With adoration, with thanksgiving, in penitence and with supreme confidence in his love. We pray the prayer which he himself taught his disciples: no other is adequate, nor necessary, for it contains all that we properly need to express. And in the most holy sacrament of the altar, we receive him, freely offered for us and for all people, and as we do so, we offer him ourselves. "Here, we offer unto thee ourselves: our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice" as the Prayer Book so felicitously expresses it. United with our Blessed Lord, his sacrifice avails for us,

becomes our own, “although we be unworthy to offer . . . any sacrifice” we dare to pray that he will accept this “our bounden duty and service, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences”. (if you did not grow up with the Prayer Book, do get a copy and read at least the two prayers which follow the second Our Father in the Communion service. There is much Catholic theology expressed devotionally there and in sublime language.

As we return to our places in church, having received the Blessed Sacrament, we may expect to feel some sense of exaltation of spirit, some inner calm. That is reasonable. But it is true that not everyone, every time they receive communion, is blessed with such a feeling of peace or well-being. There is no need for despondency if this has been your experience: you are not alone. The reality of our worship does not depend upon feelings, which themselves are influenced by so many things. The reality depends on knowing that we have, however imperfectly, offered ourselves to God in love and service, in loving service, that he is quite literally with us, in us as we leave the altar. The feelings don't matter.

Having resumed our place, we shall want to say some silent prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps spend a little time on our knees, reflecting upon the mystery of this most holy sacrament whereby God gives himself to us and we in return are enabled to offer him ourselves. We may or may not wish to join in singing a hymn as communion is distributed. But whether expressed in words, singing, or simply in silent adoration, we may properly give thanks to God for this most precious gift.

The formal thanksgiving follows in the Prayer after Communion, sung or said by the Celebrant and as usual we respond Amen. Then the Blessing and dismissal: Go forth, the Mass is ended.

It has always seemed faintly silly to me that we do nothing of the sort! We may sing the Angelus; we shall probably have a final hymn, maybe quite a long one, to enable the Celebrant and assistants to walk out in procession. And then of course there are the refreshments and the conversation and lists for this or that to be signed, and all the myriad other things it seems we must do before leaving Church. I don't decry any of those; we are after all a congregation of friends (or should be!) and these are the things friends like to do. But the Mass is ended.

We may feel, if we have prayed in the ways I have outlined, we've been hard at it. That's good. We shouldn't come to church as spectators. We are participants, and prayer needs attention and effort. But as we return home, let us not forget the blessings we have received, nor keep them to ourselves alone. Though to English sensibilities, the alternative forms of dismissal seem rather awkward “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life” do provide a reminder that prayer continues after Mass. I don't mean of course that we should be constantly mumbling holy words. But we should hope to live in constant recollection of God and the Salvation won for us through the sacrifice of Christ which we have not only commemorated but celebrated participated in during our time at Mass. And we may hope that something of what we have gained through our communion with Our Lord may communicate itself to those with whom we have to do, until next time we come to pray the Mass.