

## **The Mass (Part III)**

*by Fr. Tim Church*

### **THE ORIGIN OF THE MASS**

Of course, Catholics believe that Jesus gave us the Mass at the “Last Supper”. We believe that he commanded us to continuously offer this “sacrifice of praise” which celebrates his presence among us and is a vehicle for his supernatural power to enable the Church to accomplish her work. There were, however, Jewish rites that both prefigured the Mass and provided a framework upon which it is constructed. The context of the Last Supper is the Jewish Passover celebration which included a meal that was shared according to relatively strict traditions. The Passover recalled the central act of God in history, the Exodus, in which he both set his people free and formed them into a great nation. Jesus comes with a new Exodus. He frees us from the slavery of sin and makes us citizens of heaven.

Now, there were other contributors to the structure of our Mass. The Jewish synagogue service obviously played a major role. Remember that Jesus was very familiar with the practices of the Jews on every Sabbath. Surprisingly the historical evidence outside the first two centuries of Christian history for what went on in a synagogue is a bit sketchy. We do know that the synagogue was very important to St. Paul’s missionary work. We also know that the Christians were eventually expelled from the synagogue because they were considered an heretical (wrong thinking) Jewish sect. By the way, the words “synagogue” and “church” have exactly the same meaning, referring to the “gathering” or “assembly” of God’s people.

All of this is to help form a picture of the two sections of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The first part has to do mainly with the readings from Holy Scripture and the second part has to do with our obedience to the Lord’s command given at the Last Supper to “do this in remembrance of me.” It is likely that the principal structure of the Liturgy of the Word was formed by the Jewish synagogue service. Even though there are rudimentary elements of our Jewish past found in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, it is more easily identified as uniquely Christian. We will turn our attention to stepping through the Liturgy of the Word.

The first thing that needs to happen is the assembling of the people. One particular piece of furniture that we failed to mention earlier has had some influence on how we do this. The pew was a very late invention in the Church, certainly no earlier than the Eleventh Century. It probably did not become popular until much later. Furniture of any sort tends to separate and isolate a gathering of people, or at least defines exactly the way people are to configure themselves in an assembly. The origin of fixed seating in the church was probably as a means for providing reserved seating for the socially powerful. This practice is now considered “reprehensible” by our Catholic norms.

Caution is also offered with regard to the choir, that their “place” is in no sense separated from the assembly. Everyone who gathers for the Mass must know that they are a welcomed part of the assembly and that their full participation is essential to the offering. Ushers and greeters are certainly part of making this happen. We should remember our experience of entering an unfamiliar place, and how it makes us feel to know that we are welcome. Parishes such as ours, where there is large growth, have a

particular challenge. We must go to a greater effort to help those who are strangers to know that they are welcome participants in our parish family.