

## **The Mass (Part V)**

*by Fr. Tim Church*

### **THE FORM OF THE MASS**

So, we have said our prayers, welcomed everyone and now we are ready to begin. Unfortunately we have one other little matter to discuss before we do. It is that there are a few different ways that we offer the Mass. The distinction of a “low Mass” and a “high or solemn Mass” was common in times past. Today it is not common, but some of the ideas still apply. For example, weekday Masses are usually simple, offered without music or a great many participants in the sanctuary (altar servers, etc.). This was generally what was meant by the term “low” Mass. A “high Mass” would be more like our Sunday Mass. The Gloria (Glory to God), Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy) and Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) are sung, as well as there being a provision for other music. While it is a little uncommon, all the elements can be used at any time, even incense and singing, at weekday Masses.

Having different ways of offering the Mass makes perfect sense. It’s like eating. Sometimes we put out the best table setting, light candles and spend hours in conversation with guests as we enjoy at the meal. At other times we may sit quietly at the table with a bowl of soup. The difference has something to do with the rhythm and pattern of our life. It also helps to mark off the most important days for us. Easter, Pentecost and Christmas are the greatest solemn days in the Catholic calendar and no other days should gain more notoriety than them. It is necessary to offer just a few remarks about the liturgical calendar.

The calendar of holy days and seasons has very ancient origins. Some of the days and seasons probably even predate Abraham and the Old Testament. For example, almost every historical religion includes days for offering petitions at the time of planting and for celebrating the harvest. As time passed, some of these ancient holy days received additional meaning. The Catholic calendar of observances also went through many periods of development, and is still changing. There are two major focal points in the year, Christmas and Easter. But it is not just the day that gets our attention. They both have seasons of preparation and seasons of celebration. Advent (which means “coming”) prepares for Christmas. The Christmas season which follows the holy day recalls some of the events that surround Jesus’ birth. Easter has the preparatory season of Lent (which means “springtime”) and then a fifty day season of celebration. In between these seasons is what is called ordinary time, when the work of the Church occupies our greater focus.

Even during the ordinary times of the year, the Mass gains a particular focus. The readings from the Holy Scriptures at times provide a narrative of the event being celebrated. At other times, they are a sort of commentary on the meaning of the event. And, again, at other times, the focus is more thematic, such as a virtue or a particular caution. The music and the prayers usually reflect something of this theme as well. From early days in the Catholic Church, with the development of the use of vestments for the Mass, color was used to express certain moods that were generally associated with a particular day or event. These have gone through some changes. Today they are established by liturgical norms. White or gold is used for Christmas Day and Easter Day. White is used for their respective seasons that follow, and for the feasts of saints who are not martyrs. Purple is used for Advent and Lent and, together with black, may be used for funeral Masses, although white is more common. Green is used for ordinary time, and red is used for the

feasts of martyrs and for Pentecost. Vestments are sometimes decorated with symbols that set them off for particular uses, such as the monogram of the Blessed Virgin. More on vestments later.