

The Mass (Part VI)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

Even though the Mass can be divided into two major parts, the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist, there are a variety of smaller movements found within. The first of these has received a variety of names (“gathering rites”) but is now called the Introductory Rites. It includes everything that happens from the Entrance Procession through the Opening Prayer.

It is good to think about the liturgy as a movement in which everyone is involved, rather than something that is observed by an audience. In fact, the various names and words used throughout the Mass are specifically chosen to remind us of this. The place where we gather is not called an auditorium, as in some non-Catholic communities. The place where the pews are arranged is called the “nave”, a word that reminds us of a boat. We are like that, a community in motion traveling to the common goal of our native home in heaven. The word “liturgy” is derived from a word that means ‘work.’ In fact it refers to a work that is performed for the benefit of the whole community, the whole world. So, the Mass is not something that we observe. We don’t merely watch others work. We are part of everything that happens.

As we mentioned last time, there are a variety of ways of offering the Mass. The Entrance procession is usually accompanied by a hymn at the Sunday and holy day Masses, and silently at other times. There are a variety of possibilities here, some of which are rarely experienced in parishes in the United States. An entrance antiphon or a psalm can be sung to support the entrance, but typically it is a song sung by the congregation. These are usually connected to the celebration of the day or the theme of the readings from Holy Scripture.

The order of the procession is actually indicative of what follows. The processional crucifix is first, just as in ancient times the insignia of a king, governor or military leader led the procession to let people know who was coming. It is the presence of Jesus our King that we celebrate. The fresco art of the ancient church gives us an historical record of many aspects of the liturgy. The basilica church of San Clemente in Rome is unique in this regard; it includes a very ancient picture of a procession, led by a thurifer. From even pre-Christian times, incense has added both festivity and solemnity to great events. There was a period in history when trade in incense had a great influence on world economies. From Old Testament times it has been a symbol of prayer (the rising smoke, Psalm 141:2) and sacrifice (a once expensive commodity).

Typically, the order of the procession (on festive occasions) is the thurifer leading the way, followed by the crucifer (carrying the processional crucifix), followed by two candle bearers and other altar servers. These are followed by the lector (reader), deacon, concelebrating priests and then finally the presider (either a bishop or priest). There are occasions when others may join these in the procession, such as children to receive first communion or candidates for confirmation. In some places a bridal couple would follow the priest at a wedding Mass. The procession adds to the honor of the various persons involved in the liturgy.

Since it moves from among the people, it is also a presentation by the community, a sign of their unity in making this offering.

As the procession arrives at the altar, all except those carrying the cross and candles genuflect as a sign of reverence for the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Tabernacle. (If there is no Tabernacle in the sanctuary, the participants bow as a sign of respect for the altar.)