

# WHAT CATHOLICS DO

CECELIA P. REGAN



## WHAT CATHOLICS DO IN CHURCH AND AT MASS AND WHY

\$1.00 each

**T**he most important thing we do as Catholics is to come together every week for **Eucharist** (also called "**The Mass**") to celebrate, offer praise, remember what God has done for us, thank God, and ask him for the things we need. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called the Eucharist "the source and summit of our faith." We hope to help Catholics recognize that truth and invite everyone into a deeper relationship with God through an understanding of our worshiping community.

This "Tips" pamphlet is written very simply in the hope that it will help parents explain to their children the things that we do in church and why we do them. It may also serve as a refresher for adults, and be easy enough for older children to use on their own.

### What is the Mass?

*The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (2004) defines the Sacrament of the Eucharist clearly (n. 511):

During the celebration of the Mass, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of Jesus' words by the priest, the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, which is offered in an unbloody manner in sacrifice for us and in praise to the Father. The assembly actively participates in prayers, hymns, psalms, responses, and an inner-self offering along with Christ to the Father. All who are properly prepared can receive Holy Communion, by which Jesus gradually transforms the receivers into himself and which leads them to Gospel witness in the world. Simply put, Mass is a ritual prayer of thanksgiving ("Eu-

charist" means "thanksgiving") and commemoration of the Last Supper: a meal, a sacrifice, and a commissioning. All we do as Catholics revolves around this truth and reality.

### The church building

The church building is where we gather to celebrate Mass and most other sacraments. When you examine a church building, the architecture, sacred furnishings, art, colors, signs, and symbols all point to God, and reflect the faith of the people who built it. Many churches have spires, bell towers, and vaulted ceilings drawing our eyes to heaven. Notice the doors of your church. By their design, do they tell you that you are entering a holy place? The gathering space, once known as the vestibule but now more commonly called the **narthex**, is usually a large, inviting room you come into as you enter the church. There greeters welcome us and we make the transition from the secular world into the holy presence of God. Often the **vesting sacristy**, where the priests, deacons, and altar servers vest or put on the special garments (**vestments**) worn for Mass, is located off the narthex.

The **windows** of our churches speak volumes about our life in Christ. In many churches, the stained glass tells the stories of our redemption. Long ago, when people could not read, the Bible stories depicted in the windows helped them remember what God has done. The tradition continues.

The **sanctuary** is the sacred space, usually raised up, that is the center of the church's public worship. Within the sanctuary we hear of God's love for us as the Word of God is proclaimed at the **ambo** or pulpit. The **altar** table

©2008 CHURCH magazine

is the primary sign of Christ within the building, where the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus. Inserted into the altar is an altar stone containing the sealed relics of a saint, to remind us of the holy people who shared in the Lord's sacrifice.

The Mass is often called a sacred meal, and all the accoutrements of a special family meal are present in the sanctuary: crucifix, candles, table linens (**altar cloths**), flowers, and chairs for the ministers—priest, deacon, lectors, altar servers. The **bread and wine** are essential to the eucharistic celebration. These are the food and drink that become the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation.

### What special books and vessels are used in celebrating the Eucharist?

- **Lectionary**—The book containing the Old and New Testament readings proclaimed during Mass
- **Book of the Gospels**—The stories of Jesus found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which may be carried in procession at the beginning of Mass
- **Sacramentary**—The “book of the sacred mysteries” containing all the prayers and directions (called **rubrics**) for celebrating Mass
- **Cruets**—small vessels usually made of glass that hold the water and wine poured into the chalice.
- **Paten**—the plate that holds the consecrated Body of Christ
- **Chalice**—the cup that holds the Precious Blood
- **Ciborium**—a vessel that has a lid and holds the consecrated hosts that will be received by the people. More modern ciboria are often shaped like bowls, while older ones resemble chalices.
- **Lavabo**—the small pitcher and bowl used to wash the priest's fingers before the consecration of the Mass

The **tabernacle** is the special container where consecrated hosts are reserved for private devotion outside of Mass and for bringing Communion to the sick. It may be in the sanctuary or in another part of the church. A sanctuary lamp, usually kept burning whenever Communion hosts are present in the church, is lit close to the tabernacle to remind us that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist.

The **pews** where the assembly are seated are directed toward the sanctuary area, sometimes surrounding the altar, so that the action of the Mass is easily accessible to all.

The seasons of the **church year** help us focus on events of Jesus' life and our salvation. Symbols and decorations remind us of what we are celebrating. The colors of the seasons are reflected in the priest's vestments and around the church. Green, the color of hope, is worn during ordinary

time. Purple, the color of penance, is worn during Advent and Lent. Red is worn to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and confirmation, on Passion Sunday, Good Friday, and feasts of martyrs. White, the color of joy, is worn for the Christmas and Easter seasons, for feast days, for weddings, and for funerals.

Usually in or near the sanctuary there is a special closet or chest called the **ambry**, where the sacred oils are kept for celebrating the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the anointing of the sick.

The location of the **baptismal font** has great significance. In newer churches, it may be located in the narthex or at the entrance of the church. Other churches have located the baptismal font in the center of the church or near the altar. The proximity to the front door and altar tells us that it is *through* the sacrament of baptism that we become members of God's family, the church. Close to the baptismal font is the **paschal or Easter candle**. This large candle, which is first blessed and lit each year at the Easter vigil, reminds us that Christ is our light, who alone obliterates the darkness of sin and death. We light the paschal candle during the fifty days of Easter and at baptisms and funerals.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the participation of the people during Mass has been strongly encouraged. **Music ministry** to aid in our prayer has taken on new importance. A podium to the side of the altar provides a place where the **cantor** (leader of song) leads the congregation in responses and hymns.

**Reconciliation rooms**, previously known as confessionals, are the special places to celebrate the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. Most churches offer the option of celebrating penance face to face, seated in a chair facing the priest, in addition to the option of confession behind a screen for anonymity. Face-to-face confession encourages a conversation about real spiritual growth, but the person going to confession always has the right to exercise the option of anonymity.

Our faith community has the wonderful tradition of devotion for the Blessed Mother and the saints. Often members of other faith communities do not understand this affection. We do not pray to the statues themselves, but ask the saints to bring our prayers directly to God “through their intercession.” The **statues** in our churches remind us to follow their holy lives and are a visual reminder of their favor with God. The **stations of the cross** are the story of Jesus's journey to death in fourteen scenes. Other artwork in church helps to center our minds and hearts on the life of Jesus and our relationship with God.

## The role of the assembly, the people, at Mass

“Church” includes all the people of God, including the hierarchy (deacons, priests, bishops, and the pope). At Mass, we come together as church to praise and worship God, remember what God has done for us, ask for what we need, support each other, and share in the eucharistic meal. In the Eucharist we become what we eat—the Body of Christ. God wants an intimate relationship with us, but relationships need to be nourished.

**Liturgy** means “work of the people.” Mass is not something done to us, but something we must enter into to experience its fullness. Relationship with God takes work, as do all relationships.

The word **Mass** is from Latin meaning “mission”—sending forth. At the conclusion of the liturgy, the priest or deacon tells us to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” We answer, “Thanks be to God.” We are challenged to go forth and be Christ for others.

The Mass is a **ritual**. Rituals are actions that are repeated over and over again, that give comfort and pattern to our human lives and help us find meaning within them. Birthday and holiday celebrations are examples of family rituals. Many of us have morning rituals, and when that ritual is disrupted, it can throw us off course for the rest of the day. Sacred rituals serve the same purpose, but on a deeper level. They provide pathways into the mystery of God and are expressions of our faith. Ritual worship keeps us close to God and each other. The **Sabbath Day** of rest challenges us to let go of work, worries, and activities to entrust our lives to God for one day a week. This surrender is an act of faith in God’s compassion and love for us.

### Gestures, postures, and positions

The manner in which we conduct ourselves in church and at Mass is a very important part of our prayer. We are embodied spirits, and the physical manifestation of our prayer helps us connect with God and each other. Over the centuries, traditions have developed to aid and remind us that we are in the holy presence of God whenever we enter a church. These gestures, postures, and traditions are expressions of what we believe.

As Catholics we believe in the **Real Presence**: Christ is objectively and really present in the Eucharist, under the appearances of bread and wine. We profess this belief with



reverent and respectful actions every time we enter a Catholic church. Our body language tells those around us what we truly believe about the Eucharist and may serve as a reminder for ourselves. Some of these gestures and traditions may be obvious and some may have been forgotten.

- It is most appropriate to **dress** modestly, neatly, and respectfully. No hats for boys and men.

- **Silence** shows we understand that God is really present in the tabernacle. Turn off all cell phones and pagers, so prayer will not be disturbed.

- **Holy water fonts** are located at the doors of our churches. By dipping our fingers in the blessed water and making the sign of the cross every time we enter and leave, we are reminded of our baptism into the life of Christ and our membership in the family of God, the church.

- We kneel briefly on our right knee (**genuflect**) or make a simple bow toward the altar or tabernacle before entering the pew and when leaving church as a sign of respect and acknowledgment of God’s presence in church.

- We kneel in the pew to **pray** each time we enter church. This helps us to focus on being in God’s presence and prepares us for liturgy. If we are physically unable to kneel at this or other times, we sit quietly.

- Every time we make the **sign of the cross** we are reminded of Jesus’ suffering and death for us.

### During the Mass

At the beginning of Mass we prepare ourselves by asking for God’s forgiveness for the sins we have committed against God, ourselves, and others. This is called the **penitential rite**.

**Listening, responding** to prayers, and **singing** help us to totally enter the celebration of Mass, communicate with God, and listen to what God has to say to us about our lives. Hymns reflect the season of the church year, the gospel, and the action of the Mass.

**Incense**, most often used on solemn or festive occasions, is a fragrant smoke used to bless the altar and God’s people, and is a visible sign of our prayers ascending to God. We sit and rest to be **attentive** to God’s word in the Old Testament reading, response, and New Testament reading.

We **stand** to call our attention to the gospel, other prayers, and actions that are most important during Mass. Standing is a sign of respect. We also stand to pray together: when

the priest says, "Let us pray," it is a cue for us to stand.

Before the gospel we make **small crosses** with our right thumb on our forehead, lips and heart, asking that God's word will always be on our minds, in all we say, and in our hearts.

**Kneeling** shows we understand the holiness of being in God's presence, and that we pray to and worship only God. During the **consecration**, the priest says the words of institution: the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. We are especially attentive. It is inappropriate to leave your pew during the consecration, since it is a most sacred time of the Mass.

As Jesus commands, we open our hands and hearts to the Lord to pray for forgiveness and what we need during the **Our Father**. Many people have adopted the *orans* position of prayer (opening your hands to God), and in some places families and parishioners join hands during this prayer.

During the **sign of peace** we shake hands with those around us and say, "The peace of Christ be with you." We make peace with our neighbors before we approach the table of the Lord.

We join in **procession** with the other members of our community to approach the altar to receive Holy Communion. The hymn we sing joins all our hearts together and reflects the oneness of the assembly as the Body of Christ.

We show our respect and love for the Eucharist by bow-

ing slightly before we receive **Communion** and answering "Amen" to "The Body of Christ." If receiving from the chalice, we bow again, and answer "Amen" to "The Blood of Christ." Hold the cup firmly and take a small sip before returning the cup to the minister. "Amen" means "so be it" or "yes, I believe."

After receiving Communion we return to our pews. In some parishes, we remain standing and singing until the distribution of Communion is complete, and then have some quiet time for private prayer; in others, when we return to our pews we kneel for private prayer. At this time Jesus is with us in a **most intimate way**. We sit when the door to the tabernacle is closed or when the priest resumes his seat.

After the **final blessing**, we are refreshed and renewed. We take God into our daily lives at home, school, and work. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." **We are Eucharist for others**: we become what we eat!

### A final thought...

This pamphlet is by no means the definitive compilation of all we do as Catholics at Mass. But the basics are here and may help deepen your relationship with God. May you experience the loving presence of God as you learn, grow, and worship.

*Cecelia P. Regan is the Diocesan Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Metuchen, N.J., and a former parish catechetical leader. For pamphlets by her on related topics and for resources by other authors, go to [www.nplc.org](http://www.nplc.org)*

## FOR DISCUSSION

**Take a walking tour** of your parish church. Locate the narthex, sanctuary with ambo, altar, crucifix, candles and chairs; the tabernacle, ambry, sanctuary lamp; sacristy; baptismal font and paschal candle; the place for music ministry; the reconciliation rooms; statues; pews.

- What specifically points the way to God?
- What do you see that draws you to prayer and relationship to God?
- Is there anything in your church that is a distraction to your prayer? Why?
- What in your church reflects the current season of the church year?

### Review

- Does the way you conduct yourself at Mass reflect that you are in the holy presence of God?
- Where do you need to be more attentive to what you are doing?
- What difference has attending Mass made in your life during the week?
- Why has God commanded us to keep holy the Sabbath day?
- Why is it important to attend Mass?
- Why do we need to pray together?
- What benefits might you experience from attending Mass with your loved ones and parish community?
- How might you personally enter more fully into the celebration of the Mass?