



Celebrating the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass: A Review of New Diocesan Norms—Part II

When people who are interested in becoming Catholic are asked what has drawn them to the Catholic faith, their response may well be “I’m not sure. I just knew the first time I walked into a Catholic church that it was different.” There is something about the simple beauty and reverent atmosphere of our churches which is clear even to visitors who do not understand the true presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle.

Preparing the Sacred Space

The sacred space in which the faithful assemble for the celebration of the Mass, whether it is a permanent church building or an all-purpose building which a parish community uses for multiple activities until it can build a permanent church, should always project an atmosphere of dignity and reverence. In the case of an all-purpose building, such an atmosphere should always be the goal during the Sacred Liturgy. It goes without saying that the church and its furnishings should be clean and in good repair. The furnishings, sacred vessels, sacred vestments, and linens should be items of quality which reflect the noble purposes they will serve. They should also represent the best the particular community has to offer.

There are, of course, many details to attend to prior to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. Sacred vestments, and sometimes altar coverings, in the color of the liturgical season or feast need to be selected. Sacred vessels made of precious metal to hold the altar bread (always made of only wheat flour and water) and wine which will become the Body and Blood of Christ are set in place. The top of the altar is always covered with a white cloth, and the purificators and corporal, which will be placed on top of that cloth at the preparation of the gifts, are made ready. In making these preparations, the sacristan or other person responsible for

arranging the sacred space should always try to avoid disorder and last minute changes.

Even though they have a regular rehearsal during the week, many choirs find it necessary to go over their music again prior to the start of the Mass. Since few churches have the luxury of a separate space for music practice, this immediate preparation for the Sacred Liturgy often takes place in the church before Mass begins. When this is the case, or when the music director teaches the assembly a new piece of music prior to the celebration of the Eucharist, the rehearsal should conclude so that a period of silent reflection or meditative prelude music may always precede the processional hymn.

Spiritual Preparation

As our diocesan Norms remind us, greeting and speaking to one another as we gather for Mass helps us build community. While the time before Mass should include that greeting to those who will celebrate with us, it is also an important time for our personal spiritual preparations. A life of constant conversion with private and public prayer and acts of charity, which we considered last week, is the foundation for our encounter with God in the Sacred Liturgy.

We build upon the foundation of regular spiritual practices by arriving at church with time for quiet, private prayer and an examination of conscience in immediate preparation for the reception Holy Communion. In the noise and busy-ness of our daily lives, a time of quiet is a gift. As part of passing on the faith to their children, parents can also pass on the gift of quiet reflection by teaching their children to pray and to respect the quiet time that others need for prayer before the Lord.

Of course, parents and the whole community also instruct children in little ways such as

dressing appropriately for the Sacred Liturgy and maintaining a reverent attitude. As we all do, children profit from the habit of daily prayer within the family, the domestic Church. A child's natural thirst for God welcomes family prayer and discussions of topics concerning God and the Church. Especially as children approach the age of reason (seven years old), they should also be introduced to the Eucharistic fast from food and all beverages except water for an hour before the reception of Holy Communion.

Joining Together in Song

When all things are ready and the community has gathered, the Mass begins with the Introductory Rites, which help us prepare for a fruitful celebration of the two elements which form the core of the Sacred Liturgy, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Ordinarily the Introductory Rites begin with song while the priest, deacon, and other ministers enter the sacred space. Joining our voices into one helps bind us together as one people called to worship together in one faith. The entrance hymn accompanies the procession of the priest and ministers to the sanctuary.

When they reach the sanctuary, the priest and ministers genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the sanctuary; if the Blessed Sacrament is not present, they venerate the altar with a bow. After the deacon, lector, or reader lays the Book of the Gospels on the altar, the priest and deacon kiss the altar and go to their places. The priest and people then make the Sign of the Cross together and the priest greets the people. Any necessary opening remarks are made at this time.

Act of Penitence and Gloria

During the season of Easter and at other appropriate times the greeting may be followed by the Rite of Blessing and

Sprinkling with Holy Water, but more frequently the priest invites us to continue our spiritual preparations in the Act of Penitence. Although each of the options for the Act of Penitence ends with a prayer of absolution, we are reminded that this is not the same as the absolution received in the Sacrament of Penance. Anyone whose examination of conscience has revealed grave sin should seek God's forgiveness in sacramental confession prior to reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. Neither the priest nor the people makes the Sign or the Cross at the end of the prayer of absolution.

To conclude the Act of Penitence we sing together the "Lord, have mercy" or *Kyrie*, unless these invocations have been included in the penitential rite. In the *Kyrie*, which is probably the only ancient Greek prayer remaining in our Liturgy, we acclaim the saving acts of the Lord and implore God's mercy.

The *Gloria* follows the *Kyrie* in our Sunday Mass except during Advent and Lent. The *Gloria*, which is sometimes referred to as "the hymn of the angels," is a very ancient text and should not be replaced by any other hymn nor should it be moved to another place within the Liturgy. Because it is a hymn, the *Gloria* is to be sung, although for good reason it may be recited if it cannot be sung.

Opening Prayer of the Mass

The Introductory Rites of the Sacred Liturgy conclude with the prayer called the Collect or Opening Prayer. The priest leads us into silent prayer with the invitation "Let us pray." In the silence we lift our minds and hearts to God; the prayer following the silence concludes our introductory prayers through the words of the priest speaking on our behalf. It places us before the Lord and petitions God for what we seek through the Sacred Liturgy.