

ENCOUNTERING JESUS CHRIST IN THE MASS

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What joy it was when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” – Psalm 122:1

(The New Community Bible -TNCB)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ... Blessed are those who live in your house, continually singing your praise! ... One day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked – Psalm 84:1, 4, 10 (TNCB)

How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord – Psalm 116:12-13 (TNCB)

A. ABSTRACT

The Eucharistic Celebration (Holy Mass) is the highest form of prayer, as well as, the means of encountering the person of Jesus Christ sacramentally and spiritually. Yet, many miss the essence of this human-divine meeting based on various factors. Unfortunately, it has turned out to be a blame game whereby on the one hand, one may find some of the clergy complain about the lack of active participation and non-collaboration of the laity. On the other hand, some of the lay faithful place a luggage of accusations at the doorsteps of the clergy. Additionally, some groups and societies within the Church apportion blame to each other for some of these problems and challenges. In this brief write-up, we would like to highlight some of these factors, and find possible ways of addressing them, so that, we may reap the eternal and salvific benefits of the sacrifice of the Holy Mass. The following two synopses will guide our reflection on the topic.

1. Different parts of the Mass
2. How to encounter Jesus Christ at each stage of the Mass

B. INTRODUCTION

Has anyone asked you how you fared at Mass before? Have you in any way asked others about how Mass went? Better still, have you ever expressed your feelings and encounters at the Eucharist

to anyone? Are you happy going for and being at Mass? We often hear many people from different parts of the world complain about Mass in some of these expressions:

1. *Today's Mass was boring.*
2. *Father spoke for long, and he was not audible!*
3. *The choir couldn't sing the Gloria well, and they keep singing old-fashioned songs.*
4. *What a terrible reader he is, the lector who took the First Reading!*
5. *Just imagine the catechist with long prayers; the Church secretary with loads of announcement!*

The result of these complains is in the statement: *"I don't want to go to Church. Mass is boring!"* The list is endless, but let us add another question and genuinely address it to ourselves: *What is my personal contribution towards Holy Mass and how is my personal involvement in it?*

It is not possible that the sacrifice of Jesus *in se*, that is, in itself is boring! Mass is a mystery, what we call, the *Paschal Mystery* – the mystery of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. It is the offering of the Only Begotten Son of God on the Cross of Calvary for the expiation of our sins in order to redeem us. Perhaps, it is the lack of understanding and the absence of adequate preparation and active involvement which makes it seem boring. May be, we have lost our childhood sense of wonder. Possibly, we are either bereft of the eye-mouth-opening gesture of being surprised at the visitation of God, or have little left of the 'wow-ness' or the amazement which makes us marvel at the power of God's Word and the mystery of receiving and consuming Christ in the Eucharist! Of course, we cannot also deny that sometimes, both the clergy and the lay faithful either do not give in to the agony of preparation or that they admit some embellishments and additions, whereby the Holy Mass is unnecessarily saturated with lots of activities which tend to smother its unique beauty, essential unity, quintessential solemnity, perfect harmony and deep meaning. At this juncture, it is important for us to dig through Sacred Scriptures to unearth the underpinnings of Holy Mass.

C. SOME BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE MASS

a. Old Testament.

Basically, the Holy Mass is prefigured or foreshadowed in the Jewish Passover (cf. Ex. 12), and it is situated in the context of the Old Covenant between God and his Elect, the Israelites. Be that as it may, the Jewish Passover festival becomes an anticipation of the Christian Easter, when Christ, the true Lamb of God who is sacrificed and eaten to bring salvation to the people of the New

Covenant, leads us to new life. This new life is premised on the Covenant of love (Jn. 13:34-35).

b. New Testament

1. **Last Supper:** Institution of two sacraments – Eucharist and Holy Orders (Mt. 26:17-30; Mk.14:12-26; Lk. 22:7-20). [The two sacraments are inseparable; the latter is because of the former]. Sacrament is simply an outward sign of inward grace. It is something sacred. In fact, it is fundamental and helpful to state that the whole spectrum of the economy of salvation is founded on a sacramental principle or structure. By sacramental principle, we simply mean that visible, physical, tangible and concrete realities can be used to convey or to point to invisible, spiritual, intangible and inner realities. So, bread and wine are consecrated and they become the Body and Blood of Christ, which is the Holy Eucharist.
2. **The Road to Emmaus** (Lk. 24:13-35)
3. **St. Paul and the handing on of the tradition of the Eucharist** (I Cor. 11:23-32).

D. SOME HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE MASS

1. Since the early Christian communities operated as house-churches, the *Breaking of bread*, what some call love feasts, were a common practice (Acts 2:42). This contributed to the development of the Mass.
2. *Didache* – This late first-century document contains important teaching on baptism, fasting, prayer, prophets and the Eucharist. Also, it lists some historical evidence of major events of the apostles and the nascent church, handed down to us as *Sacred Tradition*.
3. The *Apology* of St. Justin the Martyr (ca. 100-165 AD) [an early Christian writer], considered as an Apostolic Father/Father of the Church and the first Christian Apologist. Fathers of the Church refer to writers of Christian antiquity who had a major impact on the doctrinal tradition of the Church. The period of the Fathers is said to have ended in the West with St. Gregory the great (mid-seventh century) and in the East with St. John of Damascus in AD 749 (eight century). Justin was a pagan philosopher who converted to Christianity. He used his intellectual and spiritual gifts to defend the faith to the point of shedding his blood. He wrote various books to enlighten people about Christ. In his scholarly work, *Apology*, he gives a detailed account of how Mass was celebrated by the early Church.
4. **Later Developments:** The form of the Mass as we have it today, has gone through some reforms. There have been tremendous developments although the basic structure has been

maintained. Also, there have been liturgical movements which have played a major role in liturgical reforms in the Church. We now have several Eucharistic prayers, prefaces, etc. for solemnities, feasts, memorials, etc. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) fostered an *aggiornamento* (a bringing up to date [update/renewal]) of the liturgy which opened the door for the use of vernaculars as a means of enculturating the gospel. Until this time, Mass

in the West was rendered in Latin. Today, Mass is said in many languages across the world.

E. WHAT MASS IS AND IS NOT

1. From the Greek word “*Eucharistia*,” Mass simply means “*Thanksgiving*.”
2. It is the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ on the altar of the Cross. Be that as it may, it is not crucifying Christ again and again, but a re-enactment, an active remembrance, a memorial of what Christ has done for us. Consequently, the Holy Mass is celebrated in obedience to Christ’s injunction to us: “*Do this in memory of me*” (Lk. 22:19).
3. It is not **symbolic** or a **representation**, but the **Real Presence** of Christ! When the Holy Spirit is invoked (*epiclesis*) on the bread and wine, they change (*transubstantiation*) to become the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the Catholic faith.
4. The Eucharist is not ordinary food, but the Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ who is God.
5. Holy Communion is not the invention of human agency, but Christ’s own institution.

The Eucharist is so foundational, fundamental and central, such that, with the exception of very few instances and circumstances, the celebration of the other six sacraments, namely, Baptism, Confirmation, Confession/Penance/Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders usually revolve around it. Now, let us turn our attention to the parts of the Mass.

F. PARTS OF THE MASS

The Mass is made up of two main inseparable parts:

1. **Liturgy of the Word**
2. **Liturgy of the Eucharist.**

In Catholic terminology, liturgy means public worship. So, liturgy and worship are synonymous. The first part begins with the **Introductory rites (Entrance, Kyrie, Gloria and Collect/Opening**

Prayer) and continues with the **Scripture Readings, Homily, Credo/Creed/Profession of Faith, General Intercessions/Prayer of the Faithful and the Collection** (financial contributions). The second part begins with the **Offertory** (bringing of bread and wine and other material gifts), **Eucharistic prayer, Consecration, The Lord's Prayer, Sign of Peace, Communion, Thanksgiving and the Concluding Rites** (Final Blessing and Dismissal). Through these integrated parts, we come to recognise and know our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ mystically.

We enter God's house with joy acknowledging his presence as the triune/trinitarian God with the sign of the cross. We acknowledge our sins and plead for mercy praying the *Kyrie*. Thus forgiven, we are filled with joy and therefore, burst into praise and worship through the *Gloria*. The *Opening Prayer* collects all the intentions for the mass, so that when the priest says: "Let us pray," all these personal and communal intentions are gathered into one, and presented to God as the reason for coming into his presence. Mass Intention is very important. We should never attend Mass without an intention (kept in our hearts or made known through writing), and we should also try to make a commitment by giving a token. Also, when the *Readings* are proclaimed, it is God speaking to us. Therefore, partial listening or inattentiveness must be avoided. The *Homily* helps us to import the mind of God regarding our individual and collective life situations, after which we profess our faith (*Creed*) and address our problems to God who has assembled us before him through the *General intercessions*. The *Collection* helps to sustain the Church in its mission of evangelisation.

On the other hand, the *Offertory* presents the bread and wine to be consecrated, as well as material gifts to enable the Church in its charitable work among the poor and needy and the upkeep of the priest. The high point of the Mass is the *Consecration*, of which various *Eucharistic prayers* are used depending on the occasion. Through the *Our Father* and the *Kiss of Peace*, we are reconciled with God and one another, so that, we become liberated and readied for Jesus to unite himself with us through *Holy Communion*. Thus blessed, with the sacramental indwelling of Jesus, our souls are ennobled and our hearts enabled to offer appropriate *Thanksgiving* to Jesus who comes to live in us. Finally, we receive *Blessings* and are *Sent forth* to go to the world to offer same to all around us. In effect, Mass continues with us as we share Christ with others in our public and social life.

St. Luke's Gospel uses the *Emmaus* encounter to teach us about the structure of the Mass. In fact, the risen Jesus 'celebrated' the Mass with the two disciples first by undertaking the 'Liturgy of the word' whereby he summarised and explained the Scriptures (Moses [*Law* or *Torah*]) and the

Prophets [*Nebiim*]) to two disciples of his (cf. Lk. 24:27). Jesus' homily begun thus: "**O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!... And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself** (Lk. 24:25, 27). So, through a new reading and interpretation of Scriptures with the aid of Christ, their hearts are inflamed and minds attuned to the spiritual frequency of God. Furthermore, when Jesus celebrates the 'Liturgy of the Eucharist,' their eyes are opened: "**When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight**" (Lk. 24:30-31).

NB: The key to the *Liturgy of the Word* is listening – active, attentive and conscious listening (ear-mind). On the other hand, the *Liturgy of the Eucharist* calls for more than the sense of sight (eyes-heart). So, both the mind and heart need to be engaged in order to encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. It is appropriate that at this point in our discussion, we clarify some misconceptions about the Mass by deepening the understanding of key points.

G. CLARIFICATION OF MISCONCEPTIONS AND DEEPENING OF KEY POINTS

1. Whenever we attend Mass, *we go on pilgrimage to Mount Calvary*. However, we do not go there to crucify Jesus. Rather, we relive the Paschal Mystery – the death, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is an active remembrance (*anamnesis*) of how our salvation was wrought. So, Mass is about a person – Jesus Christ – who graciously nourishes us with himself.
2. Mass is not solely a priest-activity, although he takes a leading role as *persona Christi* (person of Christ). The Church is the People of God – both clergy and laity. So, the lay faithful should not attend Mass as spectators, but as active participants. Mass unites the Spirit of Jesus with our spirit. When we receive Holy Communion, Jesus comes to live within us mystically and sacramentally. We begin to think things with the mind of God, see things with the eyes of God and live as Jesus would have us live. By so doing, our minds are configured, wills conformed and lives transformed.
3. Mass is not a social gathering like a concert or a party or a reality show! St. Pope John Paul II who describes the Mass as "Heaven on Earth" says that *what we celebrate on earth is a mysterious participation in the heavenly liturgy*. Hence, Mass gives us supernatural grace which protects us from sin and evil, and thereby fosters interior peace, clear vision and a sense of direction for life.

4. Taking Communion is *eating and drinking God* if we believe Jesus to be God. Period! Yes, *we eat the flesh of God and drink the blood of God*, but that does not make us cannibals. Rather, it makes us spiritually stronger than those who think they have power because they eat human flesh and drink human blood. The power in the Mass lies in the fact that it takes care of our past, present and future. We are forgiven, renewed and empowered to face life in its changes and chances. We are never left alone in the temptations, vicissitudes and challenges of life! Christ is with us.

5. To say this or that part of the Mass is my favourite is somewhat problematic? It is true that the *Consecration* is the highpoint, but every part of the Mass is also important. Though distinct, each part is not separable from the others since each prepares us for the next. Compartmentalising Mass is dangerous. *From the beginning to the end, from the sign of the cross to the sign of the cross, every bit of the entire liturgy is very important, irreplaceable and inseparable from the whole.* If one misses any part of the Mass, it is as if Thomas has missed the post-resurrection visitation of Jesus to the Apostles (cf. Jn.20:24-29). It is comparable to missing the angelic visitation, the first apparition encounter Samson's mother had, which his father, Manoah missed (cf. Jdg. 13). Again, it is similar to Esau losing his birth right and blessing (cf. Gen.25:31-34; 27:36) or simply, losing one's inheritance or patrimony. Attending Mass late or leaving before it closes, is unbeneficial.

6. Missing the *Kyrie* (Penitential Rite) so often is not a good sign. Missing any of the readings is missing Jesus who is the Word of God (cf. Jn. 1:1). The reason is that, God may communicate or reveal something to someone in a very deep way in a particular segment, through another person, a specific song, a word or a phrase, an action, gesture, etc. Therefore, missing any part of the Mass is like missing the whole celebration for it then becomes an incomplete celebration for the person, analogous to attending a birthday party and missing the cake-cutting or champagne-popping.

7. We do not come back home the same after attending Mass and participating effectively in the celebration. According to St. Maximus of Turin, in his *Sermon 53, 1-2.4* entitled *Christ is the day*, we all ought to rejoice on the Lord's Day, Resurrection Day [Sunday]. He says: **“No one should separate himself from the general rejoicing because he has sins on his conscience; no one should refuse to take part in the public worship because of the burden of his misdeeds. However great a sinner he may be, on this day he should not despair of pardon, for the privileges granted by this day are great. If a thief was thought worthy of paradise, why should not a Christian be thought worthy of forgiveness?”** Indeed, we are made new at Mass!

H. SOME BENEFITS OF DAILY/FREQUENT MASS

When Holy Communion is received frequently in a worthy manner,

1. It makes one holy and capable of receiving divine grace, special blessings and favours, angelic visitations, special spiritual and mystical experiences and saintly fellowships.
2. One is protected from spiritual attacks and even physical dangers. They are empowered to face, endure and overcome such attacks. This deepens faith and reinforces hope.

Conversely, when one makes it their habit of receiving Holy Communion unworthily, especially living in wilful sin and obstinate lifestyle, they miss all the aforementioned benefits and actually court curses, disfavours, and spiritual death (cf. I Cor. 11:27-31).

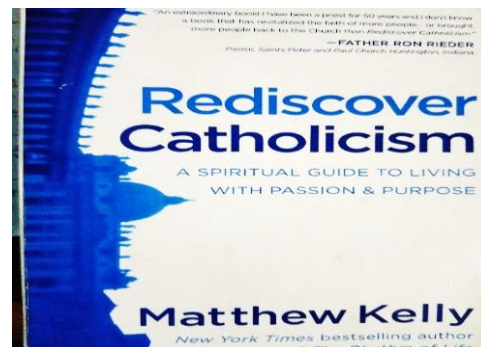
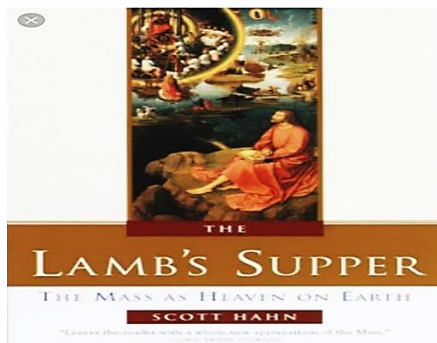
I. SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do we adequately prepare for Mass? Do we desire and devote time and commit ourselves to the reading, studying and attentive listening of God's word? Are we late-comers? As the source and summit of the Christian life, do we make the Holy Eucharist the centre of our lives?

J. THE WAY FORWARD/DEVELOPING THE RIGHT DISPOSITION FOR MASS

How do we forestall the lack of zeal for Mass? To deepen our understanding of the Mass, we recommend reading:

1. Scott Hahn's *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth*. Scott Hahn was an evangelical Calvinist (Presbyterian) who became a Catholic by attending Mass one day.
2. Matthew Kelly's "*Rediscover Catholicism: A Spiritual Guide To Living with Passion & Purpose.*"



Scott Hahn became a Catholic because of his experience at Mass one day. He went there not to worship but just to see what Catholics do, and behold, God inspired him there and then! According to Scott Hahn, ***“The Mass—and I mean every single Mass—is heaven on earth.”*** For him, ***“Now heaven has been unveiled for us with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...Jesus Christ himself says to you: ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me’ (Rev.3 :20).”***

On the other hand, Matthew Kelly sees the Mass as a gift we need to embrace by making it a spiritual game changer, where it becomes the source and centre of our lives. According to him, Mass ***“isn’t designed to help him [God]; it’s designed to help us. It isn’t intended to make him happy; it’s intended to allow us to share in his happiness.”*** So, how should these experiences play out in our lives? Perhaps, these tips below may help us have a better disposition for Mass:

1. Prepare for Mass. Spiritual and physical preparation. Take the readings and reflect on them before going for Mass. Get your clothes, shoes, car, missal, bible, offerings, etc, ready too!
2. Expect God to communicate with you and you with God. Therefore, get a ***Mass Journal***. Put down insights, inspirations, revelations, mental imageries, etc, and reflect on your experiences to see how and where God is leading you and your family. For Matthew Kelly, when we attend Sunday Mass, we should ask God: ***“Show me one way in this Mass that I can become a-better-version-of-myself this week!”*** Mass should influence our lives.
3. Engage yourself by participating actively, consciously, enthusiastically, powerfully, and fully via the liturgical responses and gestures of singing, clapping, kneeling, etc, as one’s health and age permits them. Joining a Church group like the choir and lectors also helps.
4. Don’t be afraid to be silent. Silence is a special form of prayer and it is an integral part of the Mass. The Mass encourages silence and has great space for it, particularly after the readings and homily and after communion. Silence provides the atmosphere for meditation, inspirations, word of knowledge, confirmation of gifts, self-realisation and inner healing.
5. Let the Mass be the centre of your life. Daily Mass is a spiritual vitamin/bulldozer/anchor.
6. Having understood the Mass, share your faith with others by inviting people for Mass.

Be aware that emergencies or unforeseen contingencies are bound to happen. Circumstances may make it difficult for someone to attend Mass daily, especially when they live very far away from Church or where there is no priest. In such cases, one should desire to unite themselves with Christ

through the *Act of Spiritual Communion* (prayer), but let us remember that this prayer is not a replacement for Mass! The Act reads:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love you above all things, and I desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

K. CONCLUSION

To attend Mass is to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. We should make every effort to keep this purpose in mind and in view. God loves and cares for us. It is his desire to draw us closer to himself, so he chooses nothing but food – and we know that food helps us to grow and mature. Christ gives us the food of his own Body and Blood to feed us, so that, we may derive all the spiritual nourishment we need in our earthly journey to heaven where we are promised the beatific vision, of seeing God face to face. We certainly do not want to miss this great opportunity!

We conclude with the hymn, *O Bread of Heaven*, composed by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. It runs:

1. O bread of heaven beneath this veil/ Thou dost my very God conceal;
My Jesus, dearest treasure, hail/ I love thee and adoring kneel;
Each loving soul by thee is fed/ With thine own self in form of bread.
2. O food of life, thou who dost give/ The pledge of immortality.
I live; no, 'tis not I that live/ God gives me life, God lives in me:
He feeds my soul; he guides my ways/ And every grief with joy repays.
3. O bond of love, that dost unite/ The Servant to his living Lord;
Could I dare live, and not requite/ Such love then death were meet reward:
I cannot live unless to prove/ Some love for such unmeasured love.
4. Beloved Lord in heaven above/ There Jesus thou awaitest me;
To gaze on thee with changeless love/ Yes thus I hope, thus shall it be:
For how can he deny me heaven/ Who here on earth himself has given.