

Eucharist



Encountering Jesus,
Our Bread of Life

*The Solemnity of
the Most Holy Body and Blood
of Christ
2021*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

One hundred and fifty years ago this December, Catholics celebrated Mass for the first time in the basement of the first Catholic church in Peabody, Saint John the Baptist. Looking back over this length of time gives us reason us to rejoice and give thanks to God for his continuous presence in our personal and parish life.

My heart is full of gratitude to the Lord for being pastor here in Peabody throughout these last 21 years of our history. Working together we have seen Christ build us up as a family of faith in spite of many challenges. He inspired us also to restore and renew our outstandingly beautiful church.

At the center of my ministry and our life and work as a community is the Eucharist. Yet for months we were unable to share this gift of God because of a terrible pandemic. This painful experience has made me ever more aware of how precious is the Eucharist that Jesus has given us. Thankfully a year ago, on the Solemnity of Pentecost, our doors were open and people began to return!

These thoughts prompted me to gather together some of the letters I wrote to you during this Year of the Eucharist. My humble hope is that what you read will help rekindle in you a brighter fire of faith and love for the Lord, an intimate spirit of oneness with him and a stronger sense of community as the Body of Christ, the church in Peabody.

We have so much to be thankful for to the Lord. In the Eucharist Jesus has been and always will be one with us. Through him we become one with each other.

God bless you all!

Fr. John
Fr John MacInnis

The Eucharist: Person, Action, Presence!



When we speak of the Eucharist, we are talking about a personal God who is alive and active in our midst. God entered the world he created to make himself and his grace present and effective in our lives. We can think of the Eucharist narrowly as the consecrated host which we know in faith is the "Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ."

Yet there is so much more to know and believe. Our goal is to encounter Jesus, our risen Lord in the way he has left for us to worship him.

As a child and as an adult I felt blessed to know how close we can be to God in his Son, Jesus, when we go to Mass and when we make a visit to church where Jesus is present in the tabernacle. But today it seems that fewer and fewer people have this experience.

Cardinal Sean called us to a *Year of the Eucharist* because he was disturbed as we are to read in surveys of religious practice that today many Catholics do not believe in transubstantiation, the term used to describe what happens at Mass when bread and wine become the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus.

Part of the denial or lack of acceptance of this truth about the Eucharist may begin with the very fact that we are trying to comprehend a profound mystery, a reality that human minds have always found difficult to grasp. Living in an age where empirical science dominates our view of what is real and unreal, we Catholics of the 21st century face a lot of skepticism about matters of faith that cannot be "proven" with concrete evidence.

To be sure, there are Eucharistic miracles which present us with some amazing testimonies of what people have seen as evidence of how bread or wine took on the appearance of real flesh or blood. These were subjected to forensic investigation.

These miracles or signs of the supernatural generate wonder. Alone they don't bring us to experience being in the living presence of Jesus. Rather they give us visible clues, as it were, of the flesh and blood of a man.

What will lead us beyond these clues, to a personal meeting with the risen Christ whose reality mysteriously straddles the boundary between earth and heaven, time and eternity?

The answer is twofold. On the one hand, the grace of God must open the eyes of our soul. Jesus himself said so. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6: 44). We can ask for and should seek that grace. God wants us to know him. At the same time, even as God reveals himself, he conceals himself.

On the other hand, do we really want to experience Jesus? In freedom, we can choose not to believe. We can seek him out or avoid him. God has given us help to find him. If we look to the Church, we will find a legacy of saints, scholars, and ordinary people who can lead us to believe by sharing their understanding and experience of what the church believes and how the church expresses its faith in its worship and its life.

This is an opportune time to go deeper into the mystery of the Eucharist, into what we believe and why we worship God as we do in the Catholic Church. We are blessed today to be able to participate at Mass more actively and consciously with words we can understand in our own language and with gestures, we can see more clearly.

These are pastoral reflections intended to make clearer how we come to Jesus in the way we pray as a community. The Catholic tradition surrounding this great gift of the Eucharist is almost two thousand years old. It draws on texts as old as the bible and as new as recent papal documents and the largest council of the world's bishops in all of history: The Second Vatican Council. Let's back first to what the New Testament and Judaism teach us about Jesus and how he prayed. Then I will explain with church texts of our times, especially with the Roman Missal, why we worship the way we do, even with some very concrete explanation of parts of our celebration of the Eucharist.

How Jesus Prayed: *in a Home and in the Temple*

To understand and appreciate the Eucharist we begin where Jesus began. How and where did Jesus pray with others? What rituals shaped his religious life? As a devout Jew Jesus would have faithfully observed from his childhood the precepts of Moses which prescribed in detail when, where, and how this annual sacred meal was to be celebrated.

To be sure, Jesus often prayed spontaneously and gave instructions to his disciple about how to pray in personal ways and privately. He taught them words to use (e.g. the Our Father), and attitudes to have when we pray (e.g. confidence, perseverance, humility.) He himself often went off to pray alone and reminded others of the importance of prayer in private and always from the heart. His prayers were often the psalms which he learned by heart. He criticized empty actions. At the same, time he prayed with rituals he learned and respected as communal. From those came forms that shaped our Eucharist, our Catholic way of worship.



The Passover meal at home. This was one of the rituals in which Jesus offered praise and worship to his Father in strict continuity with the tradition of God's people, Israel. It took place in a room, often at home with family.

In the upper room on Holy Thursday, that family was Jesus' disciples. Following his example and his words his disciples and a growing community kept repeating this Passover of the new covenant at table in small and eventually larger homes. As the new Israel, they kept Jesus' mandate at this meal: "*Do this in memory of me.*"

The first description we have of Christians worshipping together after Jesus ascended and sent his Spirit is this: "*They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). Here in a nutshell we have a simple outline of what happens today at every liturgy. The community comes together. There are the gospels and epistles which contain the teaching of the apostles, often accompanied by readings from the scriptures that came from Israel, the Old Testament. And then there is the breaking of bread and prayers.

The temple sacrifice. At the Passover meal, besides bread and wine, there was a roasted lamb that had to be consumed. The lamb would have been offered by priests in sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. At Passover time hundreds of thousands of lambs were slaughtered there. This made the meal a memorial sacrifice, recalling the blood of the lamb that saved the Hebrews from the angel of death. Jesus connected his breaking bread and sharing of wine with the sacrifice he will undergo. Our Eucharist today is a Passover meal in which we recall and relive the moment when Jesus, the Lamb of God, offered himself for us in sacrifice to the Father.

As an observant Jew, Jesus went on pilgrimage to the temple for festivals. As an infant, he was taken there by his parents for his circumcision. As a young boy, he found a home there with his Father (Luke 2:41ff). His ministry took him at times far from Jerusalem. But the temple was the place to which he would return to teach and to heal.



Our Eucharist brings together a Passover meal and a sacrifice. Our churches are both homes where we break bread with our family of faith, and temples in which we celebrate the one, lasting sacrifice of Jesus.

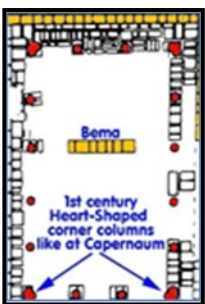
How Jesus Prayed: in the Synagogue

To explore further how Jesus worshipped and how that shapes our worship, we need to look at the place and the day when Jesus worshipped most often: the synagogue, on the Sabbath. Gathering for prayer once a week on the Lord's Day was a sacred duty for Jews, in fulfillment of the third Commandment.

We see how faithfully Jesus observed the Sabbath in the Gospel of Luke. It describes Jesus taking up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and begins preaching from its text. "*He came to Nazareth where he had grown up and went **according to his custom** into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah.*" (Luke 4:16, bold type added) In these very few words we learn that going to the synagogue on the Sabbath was what Jesus did very regularly. In all likelihood, every week.

After the temple in Jerusalem was completely destroyed in 70 AD, the synagogue emerged in Judaism as the singular place of worship for Jews. A synagogue is literally a "gathering place." The New Testament depicts synagogues as places where Jews gathered to hear the scriptures, written on scrolls which were kept in a niche or a cabinet known as the Ark of the Scrolls.

A visitor to any Jewish synagogue today will notice two dominant architectural features: the Bema, a platform or podium, from which the scriptures are read and explained, and the Ark of the Scrolls, where the sacred texts of the Torah are kept. The Hebrew scriptures (which we refer to as the Old Testament) constantly refer to the word of God as the instrument which instructed God's people; it also shaped their prayer.



at left: layout of an ancient synagogue.

at right: a niche of the scroll



In our Catholic churches, the ambo or pulpit is our *bema*. Here the scriptures are proclaimed and preached. A much more extensive use of the bible in our Mass today was an outstanding

contribution of Vatican II to our worship. The council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation (*Dei Verbum*) represents the church's most authoritative and complete exposition on the meaning and centrality of the bible to Catholic life and worship. In that document, Pope Saint Paul VI, together with the bishops of the world summoned us as believers to read, study and pray over the scriptures to an extent that most of us never had. When we began hearing so many more texts of the bible, lectors and preachers had to face the challenge of making the word of God what it was intended to be: "*living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.*" (Hebrews, 4:12).

Today's Missal describes scripture and preaching as integral to Catholic worship. "*The Mass consists in some sense of two parts, namely the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, these being so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass is spread the table both of God's Word and of the Body of Christ, and from it the faithful are to be instructed and refreshed.*" (GIRM, 28)

The other piece of furniture found in ancient synagogues was the chair from which the leader of worship spoke. Jesus refers to the "*chair of Moses*" to point out to his listeners that we must recognize the authority of those who preach but not follow their behavior when their words and actions don't coincide. I mention this because our churches have a place where the priest leads us: the presider's chair or *cathedra* which symbolizes his authority and where he may even choose to preach.



Jesus has shown us how to pray with him and through him to the Father. When we pray at Mass today we follow patterns of worship found in three places where Jesus prayed with others: the synagogue, the home, and the temple.

On Sunday, our Sabbath, we join with Jesus in a church, the gathering place where we hear his word from the scriptures at the ambo.

In every church, the house of God's family, we celebrate our Passover meal with bread and wine that become the true Lamb of God. And in our churches, we enter the sanctuary of the temple where Christ joins our sacrifice to his to the praise and glory of the Father for our salvation.

The teachings of Saints John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II show care for and integration of these three elements of word, meal, and sacrifice. Our churches today incorporate features of those ancient sacred spaces in which Jesus once prayed. All this comes together in the way we celebrate Mass in our time!

At Mass, Christ becomes fully and truly present to us!

Christ comes to meet us through the sacrament of the Eucharist. How does this happen?

Let's look now at the structure of the Mass to see how Jesus becomes present to us: in the people who gather, in the priest who leads them, in God's word proclaimed, in other actions of the Mass, and ultimately in the breaking of the bread and in the partaking of the Body and Blood of the Lord at communion.

In the two parts of our Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we Catholics do what the church has done since its beginning. Only Catholic and Orthodox Churches have remained fully faithful to these two essential components of the Mass: word and sacraments. Many Protestant churches have scripture readings and preaching like ours, but do not have the gift of Holy Communion that we enjoy as our true sharing in the Body and Blood of the Lord.

The Liturgy of the Word. Looking back at the life and ministry of Jesus, we find the foundation of our Liturgy of the Word in the Jewish synagogue service which Jesus would have attended every week as a boy and as an adult. Synagogues had a place to wash oneself as a sign of purification. So, our Mass begins with the penitential rite which sometimes even includes a rite of sprinkling with water. We prepare ourselves to worship God by becoming conscious that our sin has estranged us from God. We call out to Jesus as people did: "Lord, have mercy!" The priest offers us spiritual

cleansing. He then pauses to invite us to gather our intentions together in the opening prayer, appropriately called "The Collect."

Just as Jesus heard and read from the Jewish scriptures, so we listen often to the Old Testament and then the New Testament. These are ancient texts. Yet God still speaks and the priest helps us to take away a message for our life. When Jesus himself preached in the synagogue, he spoke of the fact that he was not just recalling how God spoke of old. He said he was fulfilling what had been foretold! (see Luke 4:21). God's word calls us to faith. So after hearing his word we profess our belief in what was spoken. The creed is a brief ancient summary of what Christians always believed. We then pause to reflect quietly on God's word.

Liturgy of the Eucharist. About five hundred years ago, during the Protestant Reformation, some Christians broke away from the Catholic Church. They wanted to reform the Church by returning to the Bible. They dropped from worship important elements: offering bread and wine, consecrating them with priestly prayers that make the sacrifice of Jesus real to us, and then distributing the Body and Blood of the Lord. Many reformers saw Jesus as ending not only the old temple but any action of sacrifice.

We know that Jesus foresaw and predicted the end of the Jewish temple and animal sacrifice. But he also foretold that one day people would worship God in other places (see John 4:21) The homes of his disciples became the new temples, eventually becoming the small and great church buildings where we do what was commanded.

At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the new ritual of sacrifice, the Eucharist, by giving new meaning to an old rite, the Passover meal. Every Mass includes the words of the gospel that describe what Jesus did and commanded us to do. He took bread, blessed it, and broke it and gave it to them. "Take and eat: this is my body!" He took a cup of wine and blessed it. "Take and drink: this is my blood!" Through these very words, spoken so often in our churches for almost two thousand years, especially every Sunday, we have kept his command: "*Do this in memory of me!*" Jesus has kept his promise: "*I am with you always until the end of the world.*" (Mt. 28:20)

Around the Table of the Lord

Now let's look at specific aspects of the Mass: the altar where we gather, the bread we use, the cup of wine we offer, the gestures of the priest, other details about how our worship as Catholics reflects our belief, following the very revealing dictum "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" the rule of prayer is the rule of belief!

What a joy it was this past Easter when so many people gathered around the table of the Lord in our churches. Reflecting once more on the Eucharist, I want to call attention to the



altar in our worship. The altar stands at the center of every sanctuary for a reason. It is the table of

the Lord where we offer with the Lord his perfect sacrifice of love to the Father.

When we embarked on our ambitious plan to restore the beauty of this first Catholic church of Peabody, I recalled how I have looked at the original altar with longing to see it used. I wanted to celebrate Mass around this magnificent structure! When it was reconstructed we inserted a recessed light inside to illuminate the beautiful lamb which sits beneath the altar. Many people had never seen this rich symbol of Christ, the Lamb of God. It was hidden behind the newer altar. Now at last we see it so well!

To help us appreciate the gift of the Eucharist I have been explaining the Mass in my homilies, in our parish bulletin, and at the teaching Masses which I love to offer to our school and religious education children and families. I always point



out the place where Jesus a very faithful Jew, both then and now, would celebrate God's great love and his victory over sin and death. That place was a home. The meal was the Passover.

For us, every Catholic church is God's home, every Mass our Passover. At St. John's, people have gathered around the table of the Lord to share this sacred feast for 150 years!

When I remember my home, the table in our dining room stands out. It holds lots of fond memories. There we shared meals on so many special occasions. Whenever something important happened, a birthday or an anniversary, we all sat around that table. It was there that we marked the holidays like Christmas and Easter. This year around our family table I had Easter dinner with only my sister and her husband, and none of the crowd of nephews and nieces and grand nieces and nephews. It was like our Masses as we slowly emerged from COVID, so many empty seats!

I will never forget the first Mass I celebrated at home, around our family table. My mom, my sisters, and my brother were utterly in awe that we were going to have a Mass in our home. Home Masses very rarely happened before 1970. You of my generation will recall how different Mass was before we prayed in English before we could see the priest and all he was doing at the altar. Turning the altars around was a game-changer. The Church wants us now to see more directly what the priest is doing *with* us and *for* us at the altar. Now with our eyes, our ears, and our minds and hearts we see and hear what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper.

Over the past 21 years, I have celebrated well over two thousand Masses in Saint John's upper church and countless more in the chapel downstairs. Some were wedding Masses, some funerals. I especially enjoyed Masses with baptisms and the many Masses I offered for and with children, with our school community, or at children's Masses or First Holy Communions. Last year it was so strange, so bizarre, when I celebrated the liturgies of Holy Week in an almost empty church, save for our seminarians and a few helpers.

Think for a moment about Masses you have attended in your lifetime. Perhaps they were very ordinary, not very memorable. Or maybe they marked some significant life passage: birth, death, marriage, confirmation, graduation. We cherish every church, every house of God, as the place where Jesus faithfully keeps his promise

to come and stay with us. He speaks his words of hope and consolation. He feeds us with his bread of life, his very flesh and blood. How blessed are we to have our churches and our Catholic faith, to have come to know the mystery of *who* it is that we into not just our bodies but our whole lives.

The Bread We Break

Going back to his last supper, the event which marks the institution of the Eucharist, let's take a closer look at the elements Jesus used which gave rise to the very elements we use. We begin with the breaking of bread and the words of Jesus recorded in all three synoptic gospels: "This is my body; this is the cup of my blood." (Mt. 26:26-27, Mk. 14:22-24, Lk. 22:19-20) Interestingly, the evangelist John does not quote these words in his version of the last supper. Instead, he unfolds elsewhere the meaning of Jesus' gift of himself as the bread of life in terms that dramatically expose the truth of the Eucharist: "The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6: 51)

This teaching of Jesus follows the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, a miracle that so amazed the crowds that all four gospels record it. Feeding so many with so little made people deeply aware that in the person of Jesus was the power and compassion of God. In the memories of Jews, it would have struck a chord. God manifested his power and compassion when he fed his people, Israel, with manna, bread from heaven, on their journey from Egypt to the promised land. To commemorate that great exodus event, Jews to this day take and break unleavened bread at their Passover meal. And so do we at our paschal meal.

Jesus chose bread and wine as the form in which he would give himself to us. Why? For us, bread may only be one pleasant part of a meal; for the poor it may be all they have. In the bible bread often refers to food in general. Giving or breaking bread to the hungry was praised by the prophets as a true act of charity. To offer bread to a stranger was a sign of hospitality worthy of a divine reward as we see when God promised a child to Abraham and Sarah who fed three unknown messengers of God (see Genesis 18).

In Judaism, even to the present day the one who

presides at dinner often begins by breaking and blessing bread. Jesus gave new meaning to this action at the last supper, indicating that for those who break bread in his name this human food will become his body and blood.

In the first Eucharist of Easter Jesus, is made known through "the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:17ff) In the primitive document, the *Didache* or "teaching of the Apostles" the sacrifice of the Mass is described this way: "on the Lord's day come together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure."

Let us consider then the importance of bread and its breaking at Mass in the way that we do what Jesus commanded us to do in his memory. One of the important reforms of our Mass involved making choices about the symbols and gestures of our Eucharistic liturgy with this goal in mind: to "more effectively foster active and full participation and more aptly respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful." These words come from the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* promulgated by Pope Saint Paul VI in 1969. This practical text guides our priests and us to grasp the elements and actions in detail, so we can worship well.



For a moment consider the bread we use at Mass and its breaking. Old-timers like myself recall altar breads were once white, paper thin wafers: a slightly larger one just for the priest, and smaller ones for the laity. Today the GIRM prescribes that "*by reason of the sign, it is required that the material for the Eucharistic Celebration truly have the appearance of food. Therefore it is desirable that the Eucharistic bread, even though unleavened and made in the traditional form, be fashioned in such a way that the Priest at Mass with the people is truly able to break it into parts and distribute these to at least some of the faithful.*"(321).

Hence altar breads were introduced that were more substantial. They looked more like real food. Priests today may use a very large host that can be broken into several pieces to be given to the faithful.

The Cup We Share

Wine is the second element that Jesus chose to use to give Himself to us as sustenance for our life in Him. A cup of wine was (and still is) part of the Jewish ritual of Passover. It is profoundly rich in meaning. There are in fact four cups that are shared by participants. In his book *The Fourth Cup*, Scott Hahn writes from his perspective as a former evangelical; he was amazed to find the mystery of the Eucharist in the gospel that he had read all his life. What I learned helped me as a priest and life-long Catholic to go deeper into this unique gift that is ours but holds so much more for us to savor!

How did the early church understand the meaning of the Eucharist? Seeing sad divisions arising when Christians gathered to eat the Lord's supper, Paul wrote using the very words and actions of Jesus at his last supper: taking, blessing and breaking and sharing bread with the words *"This is my body that is for you."* And then Jesus taking the cup said: *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"* and he repeats his command: *"Do this in remembrance of me..."* (I Cor. 11:17ff) Paul warned people strongly that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself."

The image of the chalice you see here is a window from the convent chapel at Saint John's. When I created a small chapel in our rectory it found its perfect place behind the tabernacle containing the Body of Christ. Seeing it daily in prayer reminds me of the sacred ministry of priests who are privileged to drink of his Blood so often.



Priests have always done this *for* you, of course. Then one day we began to drink it *with* you. The instruction in our Missal makes clear why it is appropriate to offer the chalice to all. *"Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clearer expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the connection between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father"* (GIRM 281).

The *GIRM* carefully assures us that to receive the Eucharist in only one form (bread *or* wine) is to receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus. Bishops have the authority to determine when and how Holy Communion may be received under both kinds. There are times, like during the pandemic to avoid contagion, only the priest drinks from the chalice.

Again, my point in explaining these details of the way we offer the Eucharist today is to help you encounter the risen Jesus, especially by participating in Mass more fully, more consciously, and more actively.

Ask yourself: what did "the cup of His blood" mean for Jesus? What does it mean for you? Look back to the agonizing prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane when Jesus asks the Father to take away the cup of suffering on Calvary, the cup he drank ultimately as the will of God. His was to be the blood of the perfect sacrificial lamb, slain to take away the sins of the world.

For us the privilege of drinking the Precious Blood from the chalice is an invitation to follow Jesus in being willing to accept whatever pain lies in store for us when we do the will of God. What physical or emotional suffering are you bearing at this moment? Is your cup one of economic hardship?

Yet wine is also meant to make us happy, something we use to celebrate. As the miracle at Cana hints at, the new wine given by the Lord is a foretaste of the cup of joy at the wedding feast of the Lamb to come! May we thirst for the day when we will drink it fully in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The "Art" of Celebrating Mass

When I was preparing for priesthood we took a very practical course on how to celebrate Mass. This was and still is a requirement in the seminary. But in 1969 my classmates and I were preparing to celebrate the Mass that had been only recently approved by Pope Paul VI, called the *Novus Ordo* or New Order of Mass. The way it was celebrated was very different from the old Mass in many respects. The most obvious difference was celebrating Mass facing the people and the use of the vernacular. In the New Order altars are to be away from the wall. The priest should face the people (GIRM 299). This means that everything he does will be very visible to people. Now the priest needs to be much more aware of making his gestures meaningful and appropriate. In the old Mass, most of what the priest did was almost completely hidden. Now his moves and gestures and manner of speaking must reflect his heart and mind. Priests are taught the "art of celebrating" Mass to avoid either adding too much or too little of their personality.

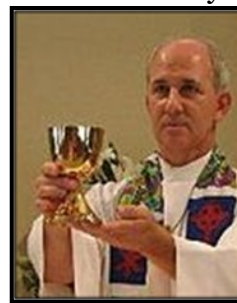
Knowing the rubrics, the directions which the church gives is important. Yet there's much more to it. The priest must know *what* he is doing and *why*. He must also bring a sense of beauty and richness to *how* he acts. Art involves bringing the best of myself and my personality to what I do. Obviously, every priest celebrates Mass in a very particular way, hopefully avoiding being either showy and flamboyant or lifeless and tedious. As an example, I will show here how I read and interpret certain actions of the church's liturgy to help our people to pray in a meaningful way.

In every Mass, there are motions we call the elevations. These are acts of lifting up the elements we use at the altar. These are acts of "lifting up," words which at a deeper level capture the very essence of the Mass. Throughout the Mass, we are joined to Christ in his ultimate act of being lifted up to the Father on the cross, so that our sacrifices (the priest says "yours and mine"!) are offered as a gift of praise and thanksgiving. We are exhorted: "lift up your hearts!" How might a priest's gestures help us to enter into this action of Jesus?

At the preparation of the gifts, the priest lifts the bread and then the wine for the first time. The Roman Missal instructs the priest simply to "*hold*" these gifts "slightly above the altar." The priest's action reminds us that we are presenting to God these fruits of the earth. When an offertory song is sung the priest speaks only very softly the blessing inspired by the Jewish prayer of blessing, the *berakah*.



During the consecration, after the priest prays over the gifts the words of Jesus, "Take this all of you...This is my Body...This is my Blood" the Missal instructs the priest to "*show*" these elements to the people. What I recall from my class years ago was that in the



old Mass the priest used to hold the host and chalice very high above his head, so they could be seen. In the new order, the priest and vessels are visible. He can show them to the people by just holding them up at say the level of his head. Some priests even turn

with the consecrated gifts so all-around can see them.

As the Eucharistic prayer concludes, the Missal instructs the priest to "*raise*" both the chalice and paten (holding the host) as he now offers these to the Father with words that we even sing to emphasize their importance. "Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever." To which the people respond, if possible in song, the great "Amen!"



This is one of the most dramatic moments in the Mass. The priest embodies in this action the very meaning of the Mass. We are offering the most perfect sacrifice of Jesus, lifted high on the cross, the work of the whole Trinity. Our Amen, sung whenever possible, is our full assent to all that is said and done!

Sounds and Silence at Mass

There are many words and symbols to our Catholic Mass, and many gestures as we saw. What about other sounds and what about silence?

SILENCE

1. Silence as we begin. When the Mass begins the priest invites us to be mindful of our sins in order to call on God for mercy. The Missal calls for "a brief pause for silence" before we pray the confiteor or the Kyrie (Lord, have mercy). What may surprise you is that before the opening prayer, the Missal says "All pray in silence *for a while*." I added emphasis to call attention to what we are doing "for a while." The opening prayer is called the Collect. It not only introduces a theme or intention for this Mass for the whole church. It is also a moment for the whole congregation to pause to think about for whom or for what they wish to offer this Mass. When the priest says "Let us pray" he means it. I take time to remember my personal intentions for each Mass. I urge you to do the same!

2. Silence as we listen. The Missal says that after the homily "*a period of silence* may be observed." Having once taught seminarians about preaching - and knowing how much I look forward to it when another is preaching! - I am very mindful of the need we have as humans to take time to think about what we have heard. Again the word 'balance' comes to mind. Our ears have been pretty full of sound. We have heard a lot: various Scripture readings and a responsorial sound and then the homily. It's time for a break to ponder in silence the questions: 'what is God saying to me?' and 'what am I going to say or do in response?'

3. Silence as we give thanks. I think a lot of us struggle with what to do during communion. There is time during communion for us to sing a hymn to honor the Lord in the Eucharist and this accompanies the movement of people to receive. After the priest returns to his place, the Missal says: "*A sacred silence* may now be observed for some time" or a psalm or hymn or canticle may be sung. For me this can be a welcome and beautiful moment in which to thank and praise God for the great gifts

we have received: the presence of Jesus in the word proclaimed, in the actions of the priest, in the whole assembly, and uniquely in the Eucharist which we have just received.

SONG

The Church today gives clear indications and encouragement about singing at Mass, maybe to the chagrin of those Catholics who probably welcomed facemasks if only because they so dislike singing! Singing belongs at Mass! It adds color and vitality to how God speaks to us and how we respond with praise, petition, and thanksgiving. St. Augustine wrote: "Who sings well, prays twice!" May we all sing again soon!

BELLS

People ask: why do we or don't we ring bells at Mass? The practice varies here and elsewhere. To answer the question "should we?" the GIRM offers only a very short, nuanced comment: "A little before the Consecration, if appropriate, a minister rings a small bell as a signal to the faithful. The minister also rings a small bell at each elevation by the Priest, "according to local custom." (GIRM 149)

This custom derives from the Tridentine Mass in Latin when altar servers rang bells to make the congregation aware of three important moments during the Eucharistic Prayer in which the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. The first moment is called the *epiclesis*, the calling down of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the gifts. The second and third were the moments when the host was raised high after the words "This is my Body..." and again when the chalice was raised following the words "This is the chalice of my Blood ... Do this in memory of me!" The bells were used because only the server knew what the priest was doing. The priest had his back to the people so his actions were obscured. And until the mid 20th century there was no electronic amplification. Setting the altar forward with the priest making visible the elements and his actions now makes it possible for people to have a clear view of what he is doing. Microphones and PA systems today enable us to listen to the words of consecration and hear them in our own language.

Returning to the point above about the 'art of celebrating' the best way to call attention to this important moment is first and foremost for the priest to speak the words clearly and audibly with care and devotion in his articulation and his gestures. If desirable a simple sound may also be helpful. At St John's we introduced a single solemn chime to raise awareness but not to distract people in prayer. It cannot be said often enough: what matters most is that we participate knowingly and reverently.

Reverence for the Eucharist

Reverence for the Eucharist includes the respect we show during Mass and outside Mass. With communion in the hand being permitted in many dioceses and even required in circumstances such as flu or virus epidemics, we need to take constant care to use our hand or tongue properly to receive the Blessed Sacrament reverently. Remember to always bow before receiving communion and reply Amen when presented with the Eucharist. If you extend your hand, let it be open and flat to receive the host and consume it prayerfully. Or if you receive on the tongue, extend your tongue far enough out so that the minister can place it without getting saliva on his fingers.

Over the last millennium, the Church came to appreciate and encourage devotion to the abiding presence of the risen Christ in the



Eucharist outside of Mass. Veneration of the Eucharist in churches and chapels has led many of us to a closer union with the Lord. To show respect for the Eucharist in the tabernacle we Catholics need to remember to make appropriate signs of reverence. Genuflection when entering or leaving the presence of the Eucharist is the norm, or making a reverential bow if genuflecting is not possible.

Adoration of the Eucharist when the host is exposed calls for even greater reverence with care being taken at all times in the presence of

Jesus whenever the host is visible. Bending our knee slowly and maintaining silence show our love for and faith in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord.

There is more to be explored and explained about the Eucharist than what is written here. I hope that these reflections helped you understand the gift of Jesus in the Eucharist and how we worship the Lord in practical, concrete ways in accord with the Church's norms and our local community. May your love for the Lord and the Church motivate you to keep learning and most of all to worship at the altar as an act of loving the Lord, your God. "with all your heart and mind and soul and strength" as the Lord has commanded us to do in memory of him.

Please join our community of Christ at Mass on Sundays and holy days and even weekdays when you can. The pandemic has imposed a sort of fast upon us, not of our choosing. As soon as possible it will be so good for all of us to come to Jesus and to His Church to do what Jesus did in the way that he has commanded us and in a way that the Church in its wisdom today directs us.

May the Holy Spirit open the eyes of our mind and heart to behold Jesus who still comes to us as he told us he would: "in the breaking of the bread."

Further Growth and Learning

There are many fine resources for learning more about the Eucharist. Here are a few:

- Visit the website FORMED.ORG which our parishes provide for you. All you need to do is indicate the zip code of your parish (St John's or St Thomas, and city) to access it.
- To understand the Mass as it reflects the work of Vatican II and the popes of our time, read *The Gift of the Liturgical Reform*, by Mary Healy. You can find it on our parish websites.
- A rich, doctrinal exposition of the Eucharist can be found in Pope Saint John Paul, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* available on the Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va/>
- To learn more about Eucharistic miracles, go online to www.miracolieucaristici.org.