

## The Mass—Part II

When someone is trying to encourage another to attend Mass, or to be more attentive at Mass, one often says something like, “You only get out of Mass what you put into it.” This—thanks be to God—is completely false. It’s true that our Lord says somewhere in the Gospel that, *The measure with which you measure, will in return be measured out to you.* The strict law of justice: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But He also says in that same spot, *Give, and it shall be given to you: pressed down, shaken together, running over.* The law of love and mercy: give a little and receive far more than you deserve. There is no better example of this safe and fruitful investment plan than the holy sacrifice of the Mass, where so little is asked of us, and so much is granted to us.

We don’t get out of Mass only what we put into it; we get far more, infinitely more. If we did receive only what we put into it, we would all walk out of Mass each day with a few pennies of grace, so to speak, in our pockets. Instead, we leave with souls flooded with God’s love and grace. And all God asks of us is to give something—the more the better of course; but even the smallest investment of our reverence, attention and devotion will reap amazingly large returns. Of course, this does not mean that we should not strive to be as reverent as possible. The point that is being made, is that the power of the Mass cannot be contained by, and is not limited to, our feeble little efforts. Rather, it bursts forth, as it were, going far beyond any limits imposed by our human shortcomings.

Let’s take an example of this from our Lord’s sacrifice on the Cross, of which the Mass is but a continuation or re-presentation. We find there at that sacrifice our Blessed Mother, who assisted with perfect attention—the perfect example whom we should always strive to imitate; but, let’s face it, we are not immaculately conceived, and so we will always fall short. But there were two others there who might serve as examples to us in another way, a little closer to us in our sinfulness: one bad, the other good—the two thieves. Neither one even wanted to be there that day, but they were

forced. Both, before the sacrifice started, would have preferred to be anywhere else but there. They had much to complain about: there was no good music at that sacrifice, the Priest had even been stripped of all His vestments, there was much lack of reverence going on—even outright blasphemy, and many were not even kneeling. In fact, it was quite literally killing them to be there. But they stayed at the sacrifice. And while one of the thieves hardened his heart more and more as the sacrifice went on, doing nothing but complaining, the other, ignored all that was distracting him from the sacrifice, and from the depths of his misery raised his eyes to our Savior and humbly asked, *Lord, remember Me when You enter into Your glory*. This thief, St. Dismas, did not have the perfect reverence and devotion of our Blessed Mother, but he made some effort, he gave a little, and received a lot: eternity in heaven and an immediate canonization declared by Christ Himself: *Amen I say to you, this day you shall be with Me in paradise*. It takes so little to attend and assist at Mass, and the benefits, the effects, are infinite. The Mass is the greatest investment plan known to man. Of course, though the Mass has infinite power in itself, our participation is finite and imperfect, hence the continual need to offer Mass.

So the Mass is first and foremost a sacrifice, *the* sacrifice of Christ Himself on the Cross, transported to us by means of the liturgical rite (the sacramental words, signs and actions) prescribed by the Church, first instituted by Christ Himself at the Last Supper; and it is a sacrifice which benefits us more than we can ever imagine; but there is another side to this which we would do well to remember, one which is made known to us through the different terms used to describe the Mass.

For instance, take the word “liturgy.” This word is from the Greek word *liturgia*, and means “service.” *Service* or *liturgia* is one of the oldest names used to designate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Mass, while being the one true sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, is also a service, a work, something to which one must apply oneself. Although this might seem, at first glance, to be

a rather cold, non-devotional way of looking at the Mass, it is in fact very appropriate; and it's a manner of considering the Mass which all too often is overlooked.

In addition to the term *liturgia*, or service, other names for the Mass found in the early Church are: *officium* or office or duty; *eucharistia* or thanksgiving; *sacrificium* or sacrifice; *anaphora* or a "laying something upon the altar." The common notion which runs through all these terms is, that the Mass is a work in which we render something unto God. Though it is certainly not to be denied that at the Mass a multitude of graces and blessings are poured out upon us and upon the whole world—while we certainly must not deny all that God gives us in the Mass, we do need to recall that the focus is on God and not ourselves. The question is not so much, "What do I get out of it?" but rather, "What can I bring to it?"

In the Old Testament there were many different types of sacrifices, all of which were foreshadowings of the Mass. Man offered up to God the first fruits from his crops, the firstborn of his animals, even the firstborn of his own children (though of course this latter was offered only ceremonially and not really killed). In every one of these sacrifices we see the creature bowing humbly before the Creator, rendering to God the choicest portions of His own creation. Such a service was a way of acknowledging that all belongs to God. Man, to whom God entrusted His creation, has the task, you might say, of directing it all back to Him, its final end. As Pope Benedict once expressed it: *Creation is designed in such a way that it is oriented to worship...Creation exists for the sake of worship.* This doesn't mean we worship creation; but rather make use of creation in our worship of God the Creator. In other words, we must constantly keep our eyes fixed on our Creator and offer up to this loving Father all that He has bestowed on us. The universe was created not for man's glory, but for God's.

*When I am lifted up from the earth, said our Lord, I will draw all things to Myself.* When God became man He united to Himself our human nature, His own Creation, in order that He might offer

it all back to the Heavenly Father. He Whom all creation obeys—He Who could make the deaf hear and the blind see—He united to Himself a human body that He might turn creation once again towards its Creator. At that moment when He was lifted up on the Cross Christ drew all to Himself, united all to Himself, and made of all creation and of Himself a sacrifice to God our Father; and now He allows us to participate in this perfect form of worship at every Mass. He also gives us an example, then, of how we ought to assist at Mass.

Offer to God all you have; offer to Him your very best, your choicest portions. We do this as we “go unto the altar of God”. In the Mass we offer up to God the greatest of all fruits, the Fruit of the womb of the Blessed Virgin, the Word Incarnate. Now all of creation is oriented once again towards the Creator—something expressed liturgically for 2,000 years when Catholics—priest and people—all face east at Mass. For as creation awaits the rising sun each morning, so at the hour of worship it is only right that we turn and offer up the supreme sacrifice in that same easterly direction, the direction which is associated with the coming of Christ. And the entire universe joins us as we adore our God. We must offer through Christ, with Christ and in Christ all that is good. We ought to use the most beautiful vestments and vessels possible; we ought to have churches decorated with precious art; we ought to sing the most beautiful music ever written. Incense, candles, well-ordered ceremonies—all of this is very important, because it is our way of offering back to our Divine Creator the creation which He placed under us. If God has given us gold and silk and Gregorian Chant and Palestrina, why should we give Him cheap glass and polyester and Kumbaya? And this offering unto God of all that is His must be a reflection of the love and devotion which burns in our hearts.

St. Benedict, that simple monk who was both the Father of Western monasticism and the real founder of Western Europe, had as one of his fundamental principles the saying: *Operi Dei nihil praeponatur*, “Put nothing before the service of God.” It is this approach to life—that the worship

of God is primary, and that all creation must be directed towards Him, and that everything we do must be centered around the divine liturgy, the humble service of God—it is this approach to life which built the Christian culture that flourished throughout the world for hundreds of years, that is, until the Enlightenment spread its darkness over the face of the earth. At which point man began to exalt himself and draw all things to his own ego, and the culture of death was born and dwelt among us. As another holy Benedictine abbot, Dom Gerard Calvet, once said: *The Liturgy, the austere monument of beauty and joy, the public prayer of the Spouse of Christ, unites heaven and earth, countries and races, bodies and souls in one great work, where innumerable riches are gathered together from creation, intelligence, esthetics, the affections of the human heart, the beauty of poetry and music; the Divine Liturgy unites movement to the immobility, silence to the word, it elevates the body and disciplines the spirit. It is the Liturgy which, for 16 centuries, has formed the spirit of Christendom...* [Demain La Chretiente, 85].

You can say that, from the moment of our Baptism, we begin a journey to the true Promised Land, perfect union with the Blessed Trinity in heaven; and along the way we too, like the Israelites of old, will be fed with Bread from Heaven, only the Bread that we eat is the Flesh and Blood of God Himself in the Holy Eucharist. This Bread of Angels is both the means to obtain perfect union with the Trinity and a sort of foretaste of that union, the “pledge of future glory,” Our life, then, is one long procession, from Baptism to heaven, and the Holy Eucharist sustains and impels us along the way.

Having been received into the Church at Baptism, having begun our journey to the heavenly fatherland, we members of Christ’s Mystical Body are reminded every time we go to Mass to “turn towards the Lord,” to turn towards the Blessed Trinity, each time the priest says *Sursum corda*, “Lift up your hearts.” St. Augustine explains these words *Sursum corda* as a command to turn at that moment towards the east, if not physically at least spiritually, in order to give oneself to Christ

in the Eucharist, Who leads us home, to eternal union with the Trinity. Turning your body is easy, he says; more importantly we must turn our hearts from our old worldly loves to the new love of Christ.

One of the most tragic events in the last 50 years, is when in the New Rite of Mass the priest and people began to face each other. As is well-known by now, the Second Vatican Council never ordered this, but it was a foolish practice that worked its way into the Church by a minority of bishops and theologians. Ever since the first days of Christianity, and for the next 1900 years, priest and people always faced the same direction at Mass. This direction was usually the east. Why? The east, being the direction of the rising sun, symbolically represents Christ, Who is the Eternal Sun that never sets, the Only Son of the Father Who rose from the dead. It is also the common Christian belief that at the end times Christ will come again from the east. As creation awaits each morning the rising of the sun, which brings light and life to the earth, so Christians await the coming of Christ, Who dispels all darkness and brings us eternal life. When the Jews pray in their liturgy, they always face Jerusalem; the Muslims face Mecca; and the Christians at Mass would face east, which represents Christ, or better the entire Blessed Trinity, Who is our transcendent God, the end for which all creation was made.

Facing east during Mass, then, is a very powerful sign signifying that those taking part in this greatest of prayers offer their adoration to the Heavenly Father, through the Son (represented by the eastward direction) in the Holy Spirit. Even when churches could not be placed on an east-west axis, the priest and the people always faced the same direction and never each other during the canon of the Mass. Facing in the same direction, with a crucifix or some image of God on the wall they were facing, expresses the same thing as facing east. These things serve to remind us that the sacrifice being offered on the altar is offered to God, our prayers are directed to God, we receive the Holy Eucharist in order to bring us to union with God the Blessed Trinity.

Perhaps you already know this, but the section of the church in which you are sitting is called the “nave” of the church. The word “nave” is taken from a Latin word, *navis*, which means boat. This term is used to express the idea that the church is kind of like a boat sailing out to meet Christ. The priest sits in the front of the boat, as it were, and everyone else is behind him, all going forth to eternal life. In this way the liturgical action becomes a sort of grand procession toward the Trinity, just as our very lives ought to be a continual movement towards union with the Trinity. Facing the same way at Mass then expresses 2 main things: faith in the Risen Christ, Who is symbolized by the rising sun; and our adoration of the Blessed Trinity, as we already begin to share in the heavenly liturgy and journey towards perfect union with that same Trinity.

It’s no wonder then, that the moment the priest and people began to face each other during the canon of the Mass, that is during the Eucharistic part of the Mass—it’s no wonder then that at that moment all began to fall apart. This supreme act of worship, the Holy Mass, began to be centered, at least liturgically speaking, on man and no longer on God. Man began to close in on himself instead of turning outward towards God. Pope Benedict XVI, when still a cardinal, said that the “common turning to the east during the Eucharistic Prayer remains essential” to the liturgy. “Looking at the priest,” he continues, “has no importance. What matters is looking together at the Lord.” The Divine Liturgy is chiefly an act of worship, but it serves at the same time to instruct us about the mysteries we celebrate. The Eucharist is both a means to union with the Trinity and a foreshadowing of that union. And this beautiful movement, this procession of man towards the Heavenly Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, is all expressed at every Mass by our turning towards the same direction, preferably east, as the Sacrifice of the Altar is offered.

If we had all the time in the world, we could go on and on speaking about the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass forever; it is an immense treasure left to us by the Lord Himself. I pray and will continue

to pray for all of you, that you grow in your knowledge and love of this divine mystery, so that we may all someday meet at that eternal banquet in heaven where we will adore forever the Lamb of God, Christ our loving Savior, to Whom be all glory and honor. Amen.