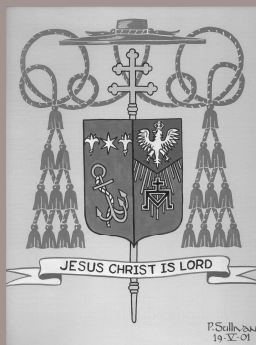


How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

Search for Community



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

Many of us who are middle-aged or older will remember what Mass was like before the Second Vatican council. We came to Mass not only out of a sense of obligation but because it was the time each week that was set aside for “God and me.”

Although we came in large numbers, we came and left as individuals. The liturgy was our private devotion, our private prayer. Each person was on his own: some prayed the rosary, others said devotional prayers or tried to follow the Mass which was being said in Latin by following along in a “Peoples’ Mass Book.” Many simply prayed silently from the heart. Most Catholics, being people of deep faith, tried to get along as best they could alone, not knowing what the priest was saying or doing up in the sanctuary. A word we often used to describe our Sunday worship experience was “attend.” We attended Mass but we seldom prayed together as a community.

This was not the way the Christians of the early church worshiped. From the letters of St. Paul, for instance, we learn that he often needed to remind them that when they came together on the Lord’s Day they came not only to celebrate the Lord’s Eucharist, but also to share their household food, making sure that no one went hungry. They truly needed to remember that in all things they were community.

Over the centuries, however, and for many reasons, the Mass became less and less the celebration of all God’s people under the leadership of the bishop or priest. The Mass became instead the prayer of the clergy. Since its language continued to be in Latin, long after Latin ceased to be the tongue of the people, Mass became more and more unintelligible. No wonder that people gradually developed their own prayers and devotions at Mass. They knew no other way to participate except to say their prayers while the priest “said mass.”



We desperately need one another
when we gather on the Lord's Day.

This great chasm between the prayer of the priest and the prayers of the people gradually became more and more evident over the years. Hence, one of the first efforts of the bishops at the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962 – December 8, 1965) was to make the sacred liturgy more accessible to the people. Indeed, the first document which the bishops produced at the council was entitled *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*. Several important sentences in that document have since become enshrined in Catholic thought and worship: “The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the reform of the liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else. “For it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”

If this is our “liturgical constitution,” our mandate as Christians, therefore, how are we, in fact, expected to worship actively when we gather on the Lord’s Day? We are asked to use all those human gifts that we normally use in daily life. Thus, the community stands at the entrance procession to welcome Christ in our midst. We are seated, keeping reflective silence, as the words of scripture are proclaimed. We pray and sing together in dialogue with the priest. We kneel as a sign of penitence. We stand as baptized Christians to acclaim the words of Christ in the gospel. We walk in procession as we bring our gifts of bread and wine to the altar or as we come once again to the table to receive those sacred gifts. All of these words, these postures, these actions, are done not simply for the sake of uniformity or good order. Rather, we do them together as a sign that the liturgy itself has the power to bond and bind us together as a community of Christians, acknowledging Christ’s presence in our midst.

The fact that we may all be together in the same building each Sunday, therefore, does not automatically make us a Christian community. It is rather our recognition of one another as brothers and sisters of Christ praying as a body that makes the liturgy that “primary and indispensable source from which we derive the true Christian spirit.” In short, we desperately need one another when we gather on the Lord’s Day.