

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

Basic Actions of the Assembly



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

Those of us who are old enough to remember the days in our church before the Sixties, the times before the Second Vatican Council, may recall how we often thought about our Sunday morning experience. We referred to it as “going to Mass,” much as we might say “I’m going to the ball game, or I’m going to a movie, or I’m going to work.” Our sense was that we were going to a church, to a place where something was going on, indeed, where something would be done for us, much like a performance in a theater.

That often left Catholics with a sense of passivity, indeed a feeling of apathy. There wasn’t a lot we could do: The basic actions or responsibilities in the Mass were handled mainly by the priest, the acolytes (altar servers) and the choir. For many Catholics, therefore, the Sunday “obligation” was fulfilled by going to Mass, going to communion and going home. Not a very exciting experience!

When the Catholic bishops, gathered at the Second Vatican Council, began to think about the state of Catholic worship around the world, their first concern was how to invest the participation of the Christian assembly in the action of the Mass. In the first document they produced, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, they taught that “Every liturgical celebration (Liturgy of the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Hours, and sacraments) is an action of Christ together with his body, the Church” (CSL #7). Therefore, the full, conscious, and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered above all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”

We Catholics may not have realized it then, but these were some rather explosive words. We had never been told that active participation at Mass was “the primary and indispensable source of the true Christians spirit.” Now we know!

It needs to be said, however, that we have been trying to get used to that mandate ever since the days of the Council. It has not always been easy.



We come to worship our God and to establish communion with one another in spoken and sung prayer.

Nonetheless, when one examines the structure of the Mass, there are some fundamental actions which belong by right to the Christian assembly. First is the **Gathering**. It is more than simply “getting into church and finding a pew.” When we come together for liturgy we gather for a purpose. We come to worship our God and to establish communion with one another in spoken and sung prayer.

Second, we gather in order to **listen**. Indeed, that is what we do during the first part of the Mass, the **Liturgy of the Word** which extends from the first reading through the prayers of intercession. But this listening is not passive. It is something we do. It takes effort and concentration to carefully hear and absorb the Word of God proclaimed in the first two readings, the gospel and the homily. Perhaps if we are a bit exhausted after this half-hour or more of listening, something spiritually important has happened to us.

Third, we give **thanks and praise** in the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**. At the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer the presider invites us, the assembly, to “lift up our hearts and to give God thanks and praise.” As the presider helps us remember and make present today the precious gift of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection we, in turn, respond with one of the designated acclamations: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again;” or “by your Cross and resurrection you have set us free, you are the Savior of the world.” At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, at the great doxology (word of praise), “through Him, with Him, in Him . . . we acclaim the Great Amen: “Amen, Amen.”

Fourth, in the **Breaking and Sharing** Christ assured his disciples at the Last Supper that he would be with them whenever they broke bread together and shared the common cup. As the priest breaks the loaf of bread in our sight at Mass and divides it among us and offers us the “wine poured out in our behalf,” we receive Christ’s gift extended throughout time and proclaim his death and resurrection until he comes again.

Our final action: **Going forth** as a gathered assembly is to be sent forth to be the body of Christ for each other and for a broken world. This is not the end, but rather it is the beginning as we are missioned to share what we have received.

If we have participated as earnestly as we can in these liturgical actions, perhaps we will feel a bit fatigued, but we will know also that by our actions we have participated in “that true Christian spirit” which is the aim of all good liturgy.