

Three-Minute Liturgical Catechesis

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Article 1: Why Are We Here?

These short reflections on the Mass were originally inspired by the late Pope John Paul II's encouragement to us to engage in "that mystagogical catechesis so dear to the Fathers of the Church, by which the faithful are helped to understand the meaning of the liturgy's words and actions, to pass from its signs to the mystery which they contain, and to enter into that mystery in every aspect of their lives." [Apostolic Letter inaugurating the Year of the Eucharist, October 2004, *Mane Nobiscum Domine (Stay with us, Lord)*]. In that spirit these articles are offered to provide helpful material for brief reflections on the Eucharist. These materials are designed to take less than three minutes to read through, (even read out loud at the end of Mass, which is the way many parishes used them during the Year of the Eucharist) so they won't delay us long from other things on our schedules. These reflections are intended to give a bit of information about the Mass and a bit of inspiration that will help us live the Eucharist all week long, or in the Pope's words above "to enter into that mystery in every aspect of their lives."

Why are we here?

We begin today with a basic question for all of us: Why are we here? Why do we gather week after week for this liturgy we call the Mass?

There are probably a lot of answers to that question. Some of us come because it's a habit. Others come because they are grateful for God's gifts. And many of us come for several of those reasons combined.

More basic than all of those reasons, however, we all come because God has called us here. It was God who chose us to be members of the Church. It was God who called us to share God's own life through baptism. It was God who called us to carry on the mission of Christ in the world today. We come in response to God's call.

And we come for Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. We gather here each week to give God thanks and praise. Sometimes we may forget that. It's easy to focus on what we hope to get out of coming to church rather than on giving thanks for what God has already given us.

The most important thing we find when we gather here is the presence of Christ himself. Christ reveals his presence to us in various ways. He is present in our very gathering, living in each of us who are his tabernacles. He is present as the leader of our worship. He speaks directly to us when God's word is proclaimed in our midst. He offers us his own body and blood as our food and drink so that we will be more closely united with him and with one another.

We come because Christ is here and because he calls us. Through baptism we all became members of his body, and we come here to remember who we are. Here we are reunited with one another and with him who is our head. And when we leave here, we go forth carrying Christ with us, taking him to our world that is in such need of his presence and his love. He teaches us and feeds us here to strengthen us to be Christ-bearers all week. Let us go forth from this place to love and serve the Lord.

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Article 2: A Royal Priesthood

Most Catholics are aware that we cannot celebrate the Eucharist without a priest. While this no doubt makes priests feel needed, it can have an unfortunate side effect. Sometimes it leads us to think of the Mass as something that the priest does for the rest of the church. In fact, the Mass is something that we all do together. We need a priest to lead us, but he needs us to worship with him, too.

The first part of the Roman Missal, called the General Instruction, says that “the celebration of the Eucharist is an action of the whole Church.” It goes on to say that the people who gather for Mass form “the People of God, purchased by Christ’s Blood, gathered together by the Lord, nourished by his word. It is a people called to bring to God the prayers of the entire human family, a people giving thanks in Christ for the mystery of salvation by offering his Sacrifice. Finally, it is a people made one by sharing in the Communion of Christ’s Body and Blood. Though holy in its origin, this people nevertheless grows continually in holiness by its conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the mystery of the Eucharist” (#5).

We’ve heard that term a lot in recent years, haven’t we? “Full, conscious, active participation by all the people” in the Mass—that’s what the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s called the “aim to be considered before all else” (CSL, # 14) in the reform and promotion of the liturgy. The council was so concerned about this because it recognized that this kind of participation “is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.” It is by our taking part in the offering of the Mass that we are to become more and more like Christ. It is our primary path to holiness.

The council fathers insisted such participation is our right and duty by reason of our baptism, because through baptism, we have become “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9). We all share in the priesthood of Christ, and it is Christ who offers his sacrifice to the Father whenever Mass is celebrated. Thus the council said this full participation is “called for by the very nature of the liturgy.” All the baptized form Christ’s body, and it is the whole Christ, head and members, who offers the sacrifice of the Mass.

Perhaps one of the most important things we might learn from this Year of the Eucharist is the importance of the assembly at Mass. Sometimes we think that our presence or our participation doesn’t matter much. But each one of us is important to the celebration of the liturgy. We each have a role to play that no one else can do for us. Only together can we offer God proper worship. Let us all lift up our voices and our hearts to the Lord as we share in Christ’s sacrifice.

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Article 3: Welcoming the Lord

Imagine that you are coming to church next Sunday. As you come through the door, you realize that someone is right behind you and you naturally hold the door open for that person. As he comes in behind you, you suddenly realize that it is Jesus himself, looking just as you always imagined him. What do you do now? What do you say?

I suspect most of us would do whatever we could to make Jesus feel welcome in our community. Of course, it's not very likely that he will show up next Sunday, looking like a first-century Jewish rabbi. He will show up here, but he'll probably look different from our usual image of him. Christ will arrive looking like your neighbor or your friend, or perhaps like a person you've never met before. He might look like a member of your family, or he might look like a homeless person who needs a bath and a haircut.

Our faith tells us that Christ dwells in every member of his body, that we can find him in the people who gather with us here every Sunday. That's the deepest reason for us to be hospitable to one another as we assemble for the Eucharist.

So often, we hear people say that the Catholic church is not very friendly. When strangers visit a Protestant church, they are usually warmly greeted and made to feel quite welcome. Many people report a very different experience in the Catholic Church. Of course, many Catholic parishes are very large, which makes it harder to know who is a visitor and who is a member of the parish. Maybe that just gives us even more reason to be hospitable toward everyone around us, whether stranger or friend.

Through the week, all of us who are members of the body of Christ are scattered throughout our community. On Sunday, when we come to Mass, we need to reconnect with the other members of the body. Smiling and saying hello to those who gather with us can help us to connect again. Brief conversations about family members and other concerns can express the love of Christ that binds us to one another.

This is not irreverent in church, because it is the way that we welcome the Lord into our midst. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). His presence in one another is the first way that he reveals himself to us at Mass. Reverence requires us to recognize him there and to respond to him in one another. This doesn't have to be loud and raucous, but it does have to be sincere and caring.

This gathering and reconnecting with the other members of the body is an important step in getting ready for Mass. Christ invites all of us to share in his sacrificial offering to the Father. We can only do that as members of Christ's body, so linking up with the other members of the body helps us to get ready to worship together. How will you welcome Christ the next time we gather here?

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Article 4: Follow the Leader

When we were children, many of us played the game Follow the Leader. As we move through life, we often find it necessary or helpful to follow someone who can lead us into new knowledge or skills or who leads a team at work or on the sports field.

The liturgy has a leader, too. What leader do we follow through the various parts of our worship? One answer is that the priest or bishop is the one who leads us at Mass. A deeper answer is that the true leader of our worship is Christ himself.

The sacrifice of the Mass is Christ's sacrifice. We are invited to join him in offering praise and thanks to the Father in his act of worship. He is our leader, and we are all called to follow the leader. Because it is really Christ who leads us through the ministry of the priest or bishop, the Church speaks of Christ's presence in the presider as the second way that Christ reveals himself to us at the Eucharist.

Those among us who have been around a few years may remember when we commonly spoke of the priest as “another Christ.” Since those times, we have learned that priests have clay feet just like the rest of us. That may make it a little harder to see Christ working through the priest at Mass.

Yet it is important for us to do so. We need to remember that Christ has chosen to work through imperfect human beings. Christ lives in and works through each of us who are baptized, sinners though we are. The Church has long taught that the validity of the sacraments does not depend on the holiness of the priest. Our tradition speaks of the sacraments working “ex opere operato.” That Latin phrase really means that Christ acts in the sacraments, regardless of the holiness of the priest. It reminds us that Christ is able to work through us no matter how serious our own limitations.

If Christ is the true leader of our worship, then reverence requires us to respond to his invitation to join him in worshipping the Father. To refuse to take part is to reject his invitation, a sign of irreverence. Our participation in the Mass—singing and praying and sitting and standing and kneeling and processing—is one way we show reverence to Christ.

Of course, Christ does not issue this invitation for his sake but for ours. Participating in the Mass is the primary way that Christians grow in holiness. As we give ourselves to the action of the liturgy, we are drawn closer to the Lord who leads us. As we enter into the sacrifice of Christ, we learn to love as he loves.

Some days we may find it easy to enter into the liturgy; other days it may take a real effort on our part. That effort is a gift we offer the Lord, following his lead and joining in his worship. Each of us has a vital role to play in making the Mass what it should be. None of us can make that happen alone, but together we can give God fitting thanks and praise.

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Article 5: Come on in: the Water's Fine

Do you remember a time when you were hesitant to jump into a swimming pool or wade into the waves at the ocean? A friend or family member, already in the water, perhaps called out to you, "Come on in; the water's fine."

Sometimes we approach the liturgy a bit like that body of water. We know that jumping in is the only way to really enjoy it, but we're still hesitant to make the leap. Perhaps we are shy by nature and inclined to play the wallflower. Perhaps we don't really like to sing or don't think we have a very good singing voice. Perhaps we participate well most Sundays but just got up in a bad mood this morning.

There can be a lot of different reasons we hesitate to jump in, but the only way to fully benefit from the liturgy is to enter into it with our whole selves. We are invited by Christ to share in his worship with every part of ourselves—mind and heart, body and soul, eyes and ears and voices. We need to worship the Lord with both our interior disposition and our external expression.

When the liturgy begins, we are all called to praise God together by joining in the opening song. This song often expresses the theme of the feast or season we are celebrating, helping us to enter into the mood of the celebration. Sometimes it may be more general, speaking simply of beginning our worship. In either case, it calls us to move beyond the limits of our own little world and become part of something much larger.

It is important to realize that the liturgy is a common action of all those gathered. It is not private prayer but communal prayer. The entrance song reminds us of this fact, because the song itself draws us into a communal act of praise. Each of us contributes his or her own voice to one musical sound. Our voices blend as one, because we each sing the same words on (at least roughly) the same note at the same time.

This is one of the main functions of music in the liturgy. It unites us in a common act of worship. It is a unifying element that recurs again and again throughout the liturgy, continually calling us to worship as one body in Christ.

Music also adds a sense of solemnity to our celebration, lifting it out of the ordinary and expressing our joy and our thanksgiving. Music can lift our minds and our spirits as we lift up our voices to the Lord.

All of this works, of course, only if we join in the singing. It takes all our voices together to give God the praise that God is due. It takes the cooperation of each person in the assembly if our music is to be as grand and glorious as it can be. If you think your voice isn't that great for singing, so what? God gave you that voice; give it back to God! Don't let any fear or hesitation keep you from joining in. Come on in; the water's fine

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Article 6: Thanks and Praise at the Beginning

Well, we've been presenting these three-minute teachings for a few weeks now, so it must be time for a short quiz. Can you remember the meaning of the word "Eucharist"? If your memory is sharp, you may recall that it comes from a Greek word meaning thanksgiving. When we gather for Eucharist, we gather to give God thanks and praise.

Two of the components of the entrance rites at the beginning of Mass reflect those themes of thanksgiving and praise. Those two elements are the Penitential Rite and the Glory to God.

The Penitential Rite

It is easy to misunderstand the purpose of the Penitential Rite at Mass. Most people realize that it is not intended to be a replacement for the sacrament of penance. It is also not intended to be a time for us all to feel terrible about our sinfulness. That would not help us to enter into a spirit of celebration as we begin the Mass.

We do acknowledge our sinfulness, of course, but we do so in light of the wonder of God's forgiveness. It is God's mercy that enables us to stand in God's presence and share in the worship of Christ. None of us really deserve to be here, but the emphasis is less on our sins than it is on God's merciful love. We are here because God has forgiven our sins. We are here because of God's grace poured out in our lives. We do not deserve this gift, but we rejoice in God's goodness and love.

Thus the Penitential Rite serves to remind us of a basic reason we have to give thanks to God. The emphasis is on the reconciliation Christ has won for us rather than on our sins. Listen, for example, to the language of the missal for the invocations for the third form of the Penitential Rite:

You were sent to heal the contrite;
You came to call sinners;
You plead for us at the right hand of the Father;
You came to gather the nations into the peace of God's kingdom;
You come in word and sacrament to strengthen us in holiness,
You will come in glory with salvation for your people;
You came to reconcile us to one another and to the Father;
You heal the wounds of sin and division;

and on and on—always focusing on Christ and on God's forgiveness. This gives us good reason to give God thanks.

The Sprinkling Rite

Sometimes we replace the Penitential Rite with the Sprinkling Rite. This ritual action reminds us of our baptism, which freed us from the power of sin and made us God's adopted children. This rite, too, leads us to express our gratitude to God for forgiveness and for new life.

The Glory to God

After the Penitential Rite or the Sprinkling Rite, on most Sundays we take time to praise God with the ancient hymn known as the Gloria. This is a song of almost pure praise of God, with only two general requests for God to have mercy

on us and hear our prayer. It reminds us of the wonder of God and the privilege it is for us to come into God's presence. Like the Penitential Rite, the Gloria leads us to give God thanks and praise.

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Article 7: The Sound of Silence

It seemed like a typical Sunday Mass in a typical parish. The opening hymn was joyful, the Sprinkling Rite was effective, and the Glory to God was sung with vigor. Then the presider said, “Let us pray.” The server brought the book to him, but nothing happened. Ten seconds became fifteen, then twenty. People began to look around nervously and wondered: What’s Father waiting for? Did he fall asleep? Is he having a seizure?

In fact, he was simply doing what the liturgy intends. The missal says that, after the priest says “Let us pray,” the priest and people “pray silently for a while.” In some Masses that “while” lasts only a few seconds, but it is intended to be a brief yet significant pause for silent prayer. This is an appropriate time for each of us to recall our particular needs and hopes and present them to the Lord. Then the priest gathers our prayers into one opening prayer, sometimes called a “collect” because it collects our prayers together.

This is one of several places in the liturgy that silence is encouraged by the official books. The liturgy must always be a blend of sounds and silence. Since liturgy is communal worship, it is natural that most of the time we are together will be filled with vocal and musical prayer. Yet there is also a need for moments of silence to allow ourselves to enter more deeply into the worship we share.

The entrance rites contain two moments for silence: a brief one during the penitential rite and a bit longer one before the opening prayer. During the Liturgy of the Word, several other moments call for times of silence. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal encourages such silences before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, (that is, before the first reading), after the first and second readings and after the homily. It calls for such silences so that “the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared” (# 56).

Another extended time of silence in the liturgy comes after all have received communion. During the communion procession, everyone should be singing the communion song as a sign of our union in Christ. When all the movement of the procession is completed, we sit down together and spend some time in shared silent prayer.

These times of silence don’t work automatically, of course. It takes a deliberate effort from every member of the assembly even to allow silence to occur. The ministers up front may be quiet, but shared silence also requires the assembly to embrace it. Sometimes we seem a bit uncomfortable with silence, because we live in a world of almost constant noise. We need to learn how to be silent together.

And in the silence, each of us must decide whether to engage in sincere prayer or just to daydream. If we embrace these times of silent prayer, however, they can do much to enrich our experience of the liturgy, drawing us closer to Christ and to one another as we worship together.

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Article 8: Listen Up: This is Important!

What would happen if Jesus came to church next Sunday? I mean, if he showed up in his first-century garb—robe, sandals, beard—and walked up to the ambo and began to speak. What would you do? How would you react?

I suspect it's a safe bet that all of us would have our eyes fixed on him and our ears alert to every word he would speak. Of course, somebody would probably be on a cell phone alerting the media to this miraculous event!

Such an event should not strike us as so unusual, however. Though he does not appear in first-century dress, Jesus comes here every Sunday to speak to us. That's what the Catholic tradition teaches—that when the word of God is proclaimed in our midst, Christ speaks to us today. He comes in disguise, we might say, speaking through the lectors and deacons and priests who proclaim the readings. The Second Vatican Council put it this way in 1963: “[Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church” (CSL, # 7).

This is the third way that Christ reveals his presence during the Eucharist. Every time we gather in his name, Christ has something to say to us. Reverence for Christ present in his word calls us to attentive listening. Formed in the time when the Mass was in Latin and we had to read along, many Catholics still have a habit of reading the texts as they are proclaimed. The proper response is to put down the books and listen with open ears and open hearts to what the Lord is saying to us.

Listening does not mean being passive, however. Truly listening is a very active response when someone speaks to us. We show respect for anyone who talks with us by looking at the person and concentrating on what he or she is saying. That takes effort on our part, not allowing other thoughts or external distractions to claim our attention.

It may be helpful to realize, however, that our primary task is not to get every word that is spoken, but to listen carefully for whatever word the Lord wants each of us to hear that day. That will vary from person to person, but Christ offers each of us the message that we really need to hear. It's a good idea to read the readings at home before you come to Mass; that's why most parishes print the Bible references in the bulletin each week so that you can look them up. Then when the word is proclaimed, you can allow Christ to speak directly to you through the readings and the homily. If you are touched deeply by one word or phrase or idea every Sunday, and if you nurture that word in your heart through the week, then God's word will be effective in your life.

In the silence after the readings and after the homily, you might ask yourself two simple questions: What did you hear Christ say? And how will you live that word this week? The answers to those questions can change your life!

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Article 9: Chopping up the Bible

Consider this challenge: Take the whole Bible and figure out how to cut it up into bite-sized pieces that can be used over 156 Sundays, plus a few dozen major feast days. Take into account the seasons of the liturgical year, as well as 2000 years of previous ways of doing the same thing. Then, when you have all the Sundays and major feasts figured out, decide how to divide what's left into about six hundred weekdays to create a two-year list of readings for daily Mass. Add to that another whole set of Masses for special needs and occasions, including weddings and funerals, all of which need a number of readings for different circumstances.

In the process, of course, you will have to decide which verses of the Bible are most important and which ones we should never read out loud in church. You have to determine how long each reading should be and where to start and stop each passage. Then you have to choose appropriate psalms for the responsorial psalm after the first reading and appropriate verses for the acclamation before the gospel.

Those are just some of the challenges faced by those who created the book of readings that we call the lectionary. In making their decisions, they used two main patterns for choosing readings.

Generally the first reading is from the Old Testament, though during the Easter season it comes from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is from the New Testament letters or the Book of Revelation, and the third text is from one of the four gospels. For major feasts, like Christmas and Easter, all the readings are chosen to fit the feast, so they all fit together well.

In Ordinary Time, outside the major festal seasons, a different principle comes into play. We read through the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, one each year, in what is called a semi-continuous reading. We don't read every verse, but we work through the gospel chapter by chapter. John's gospel is used most often during the Easter season in all three years.

The first reading is then chosen to relate to the gospel passage, and the psalm is chosen to respond to that first reading. The second reading, though, is also a semi-continuous reading of other New Testament books, especially the letters of St. Paul. This means it goes its merry way, not necessarily linked to the other readings but giving us another set of ideas to ponder.

The goal of this rather complicated structure is simple: to expose us to more of the Bible than we used to hear in church. Before 1970, the Lectionary had only one year's worth of readings; now there is a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays.

The reason for this, of course, is that Christians look to the Bible as the source of wisdom and as a way to meet the Lord. Beyond our use of the scriptures in church, we should really be reading them at home, too. The more familiar we are with the Bible and the characters and stories it contains, the more we will benefit when we hear the readings at Mass.

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Article 10: Who's the Most Important?

Have you ever wondered why we sit for the first two readings at Mass but stand for the Gospel? This is one of several ways that the liturgy indicates the special significance of the portion of the Bible that is found in the four gospels.

We believe, of course, that Christ speaks to us in all the readings. Because he is the Word of God made flesh, whatever God says to us comes to us through Christ. Yet there is still something special about those four books that give us most of our information about Jesus himself. The gospels reveal him to us, recounting his teaching and his miracles, his journeys and his encounters with people of his time, his death and his resurrection. It is in the four gospels that we find the fullest picture of Jesus and his meaning for our lives.

There are several ways that the liturgy reminds us of the preeminence of the gospels. Before the gospel is proclaimed, the deacon or priest expresses the hope that the Lord will be with us, and we respond in kind. This reminds us that the Lord is present in the gospel in a special way. On special occasions, the minister will also incense the Lectionary or the Gospel Book to express our reverence for Christ.

Many parishes use a special Book of the Gospels for this proclamation. Though this is not required, it is encouraged in the official documents from Rome. The Gospel Book is carried in procession at the beginning of Mass and commonly placed on the altar until the time to proclaim the gospel reading.

The main expression of the gospel's importance, however, is the gospel procession after the second reading. Following our shared silence after that reading, we all stand and sing the gospel acclamation. That music is designed to accompany the procession of the deacon or priest to the ambo for the proclamation of the gospel. Asking for the grace to proclaim the gospel well, the deacon receives a blessing from the priest (or if the priest will proclaim the gospel, he bows briefly in prayer). If there is a separate Gospel Book, he carries that in procession, raising it high for all to see and acknowledge. He may be accompanied by servers with candles and with incense if that is being used. As the procession forms and moves, the whole assembly acclaim Christ and welcomes him in his word by singing the Alleluias (or another acclamation during Lent).

All of this is intended to open our minds and hearts in a special way to the words of the gospel. It clearly indicates that something important is about to happen and that we should all be fully attentive.

Of course, hearing the gospel is only the first step. Once we have heard the words, then we have to figure out how to live them. Through the gospel, Christ challenges us to imitate him and to walk in his ways. That's why the liturgy treats it with such solemnity and reverence.

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Article 11: Shaping a Response to the Word

Have you ever heard anybody complain about the preaching in the Catholic Church? Have you ever voiced such a complaint yourself? I'm sure no one in this parish would ever be disappointed by the preaching here, of course, but I suspect you've heard such complaints somewhere sometime.

It's easy to complain, of course, but much harder to improve the situation. Most people who complain about the quality of preaching are quick to agree that they wouldn't want the job themselves.

Preaching is always a challenge. It requires finding useful connections between the Word of God and the people to whom it is addressed. It means figuring out how the word of the Lord applies to our own time and what it might say to the people assembled for the liturgy.

Of course, those people who make up the assembly are often quite diverse. They range in age from one to a hundred. They are male and female. Some are highly educated and others less so. There are both the wealthy and the poor. Some are liberal and others conservative. Some are eagerly attentive and others wish they were anywhere but here. Trying to speak one message to such a diverse group is never simple.

It might help to realize that the task of the preacher is also the task of those who listen. Together we must figure out what God is asking of us. Together we must make the word of God come alive in our own time and in our own lives. Perhaps the main function of the preacher is to be a catalyst who prompts everyone to grapple with this shared task.

We used to call what the preacher does the "sermon." In the Catholic tradition, the preaching at Mass is more properly called a homily. A sermon can be on any topic the preacher desires. A homily is supposed to be based on the readings of the day, the feast being celebrated, or some part of the liturgy itself. Its ultimate goal is to help us enter more deeply into the liturgy and thus to draw closer to the Lord who speaks to us.

One of the primary purposes of the homily is to help us all become more aware of how God is at work in our world and in our lives. The homilist tries to name what is happening all the time, to lift it up for us to see it more clearly, and then to challenge us to respond to God's action. Being aware of the ways that God is present among us day by day should lead us all to a sense of gratitude for God's presence and gifts. Thus the homily helps us to prepare to give God thanks and praise and leads us into the rest of the Mass.

Yet the work of the homily is not finished when the preacher sits down. The value of a homily depends on those who hear it. Do they listen attentively? Do they try to remember a key idea or word that struck home? Do they use the silence after the homily to try to figure out how they will respond? The real work of the homily begins when we walk out the church doors.

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Article 12: Where Are They Going?

Once upon a time, some people claim, a parish church during Mass was a quiet and orderly place. People arrived before Mass began and stayed until it was over. Once in the pews, few people left them until it was time for Communion, unless they had a medical emergency.

Those days, if they ever really existed, are long gone. Some Sundays, the church seems nearly as busy as Grand Central Station. People arrive five or ten or fifteen minutes after Mass has begun. Some leave as soon as the communion procession starts, and many others run for the doors when the final song begins.

We might raise some questions about the disrespect for the Eucharist that such behavior expresses, but our focus today is on those people who are told to leave before Mass is over.

There are two such groups in many parishes. The first is composed of children who leave the assembly after the opening prayer to go to another place for their own Liturgy of the Word. They usually return during the Preparation of the Gifts and stay for the rest of Mass.

The other group is dismissed after the homily. They are the catechumens, those adults and children of catechetical age who are preparing for baptism. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults calls for them to be dismissed from the assembly every week until they are baptized. Sometimes those who are candidates for full communion with the Catholic Church also leave with the catechumens, since they cannot receive communion until they are formally received into the Church.

Sometimes people wonder why we are so inhospitable to these folks. Why can't they stay for the whole Mass? There are two ways to answer that question. The Church is not trying to be inhospitable, but those who are not yet baptized or received into communion are not able to join us at the table for Communion. That necessary exclusion could seem inhospitable if they were to stay. The more important reason they are dismissed, however, is so that they can continue to be nourished by the Word of God they have shared with the whole assembly.

When they are dismissed, they go to another space where they can continue to reflect upon the Word of God and share their insights about that word. They usually find these sessions very fruitful for their spiritual growth as they prepare for the sacraments. In fact, it is common for them to express a sense of loss once they are able to stay for the whole Mass. While they treasure the Eucharist, they also miss the richness of the sharing they experienced in the dismissal sessions.

Their dismissal from the assembly might remind the rest of us of two important truths. One is that we who are already baptized are blessed by God with the gift of the Eucharist. We might all learn to appreciate more fully the wondrous privilege that is ours. The second truth to remember is the richness of the word of God that we share in the first half of the Mass. Christ feeds us from the table of the word as well as from the table of the body and blood. How blessed are we who are nourished by both!

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 13: Avoiding An Identity Crisis

Sometimes in the course of life, some people experience what is called an identity crisis. Experiencing significant changes in one's life, such a person loses a clearly defined sense of who they are and what is important to them. It may take a while to find one's bearings again, to realize what is really central to one's sense of self and the meaning of one's life.

Perhaps it is to forestall a similar crisis that the liturgy invites us each week to reaffirm our identity in the Creed or Profession of Faith at Mass. Because we say it every week, it can easily become a routine ritual carried out with little thought. It may be helpful to take a few moments to talk about why we say the Creed each week.

Think about how we do the Creed on Easter Sunday. Abandoning our usual pattern, on that central day of the year we profess our faith by renewing our baptismal promises. This reminds us that the Creed finds its first home in the celebration of baptism. Before entering the waters of the font, those to be baptized (or their parents if they are infants) publicly profess their faith. In doing so, they claim their identity as believers in Jesus Christ, called by the Father and guided by the Holy Spirit. They commit their future to sharing the life of the Trinity.

So every week, we renew that commitment. The catechumens are dismissed before the Creed, because they have not yet made this profession of faith at baptism. We who are already baptized publicly profess again who we are and what is ultimately important in our lives. And we do this together, as one voice, because our faith is a shared faith, not just a set of beliefs but a way of life shared with all other members of Christ's body.

In the Creed, we use ancient language to profess eternal truths. The words we use most often are the Nicene Creed, stemming from the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451. Sometimes, as on Easter, we use the words of the Apostles' Creed instead.

Both formulas reaffirm our faith in the Father who created us and all things, in the Son who redeemed us by his death and resurrection, and in the Holy Spirit who guides us and unites us in the Church. Thus we identify ourselves as children of the Father, as those redeemed by the Son and as people who strive to live in the Holy Spirit. We base our lives on belief in the Trinity. Consider the contrast with Muslims, for example, who affirm their identity by professing their faith in Allah: "There is no god but Allah." We also believe in one God, but we believe that there are three persons in that one God.

The Creed comes just after the readings and the homily. It stands as a communal response to God's word. We hear what God has done for us and then we express our faith in response. Of course, the words only matter if we live by them. By proclaiming the Creed, we commit ourselves to live every day in the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 14: Prayers of the Baptized

The deacon or the lector says, “For our Holy Father and all the leaders of the church, let us pray to the Lord.” And all of us immediately know how to respond: “Lord, hear our prayer.” This form of prayer was new to Catholics after the Second Vatican Council, but by now the response is almost automatic. The danger with automatic responses, of course, is that we tend to forget the deeper meaning of what we do and say.

The petitions that follow the Profession of Faith are called the Prayer of the Faithful or the General Intercessions. Each name tells us something important about this prayer.

It is called the Prayer of the Faithful because this prayer is said only by those who are baptized, those who belong to the Order of the Faithful. Remember that the catechumens, who are not yet baptized, are dismissed before this prayer begins. This is a time when we who are baptized carry out one of the responsibilities that flows from our baptism—to pray for the needs of the world. By baptism we share in the priesthood of Christ. As Christ prayed for and gave his life for the good of all people, so we are called to offer prayers and intercessions for the needs of all people today.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says that this prayer generally includes four main categories of intentions: “for the needs of the Church, for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world, for those burdened by any kind of difficulty and for the local community” (# 70). There may be more than one petition in any of those categories, but these general areas remind us that the prayer is to be universal in scope. It seeks to address the needs of all people, near and far. Thus the prayer is also called the General Intercessions.

At the same time, while they are to be broad in scope, the petitions are also to be current and local. They address the needs of our world in our own time, and they reflect local needs as well as global ones. This is really the reason that these petitions were restored to the Mass after the Second Vatican Council. The rest of the prayers at Mass are prescribed in the official books. Though we can choose from a number of options in the liturgy, we are not free to rewrite them or create our own. In the Prayer of the Faithful, by contrast, we are expected to write our own. Though published examples can give us ideas of how to compose them, the petitions are intended to be written each week in the local community. Otherwise they cannot reflect what is happening at this particular time and in this particular place.

One way we might all prepare for Mass each week is to consider what needs we would include in the Prayer of the Faithful. We might read the paper or watch the news and list current concerns that we might lift up in prayer. And we might well lift up such intercessions to God every day in our own prayers at home, for we share the priesthood of Christ wherever we are.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 15: Preparing the Gifts and Ourselves

What do you call the part of the Mass that includes the collection? Many people still use its old name and talk about the Offertory of the Mass. The current liturgical books, on the other hand, call this part of the Mass the Preparation of the Gifts. This change in terminology was a deliberate one, as was noted by the pope's representative when the new missal was released in 1969.

The reason for changing the name of this section of the liturgy is that the real offertory of the Mass occurs in the Eucharistic Prayer. The sacrifice we offer is the sacrifice of Christ. No other sacrifice is acceptable and no other sacrifice is needed, as the Letter to the Hebrews insists. It is Christ who offers himself, and we join in that offering as we proclaim the Eucharistic Prayer.

So, then, what are we doing during the Preparation of the Gifts? The key word is preparation. In this part of the Mass, we are preparing for what is to come. This is symbolized by our preparation of the gifts of bread and wine that will become Christ's body and blood. In these few moments between the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Prayer, we make the preparations for the Eucharistic Meal and the great prayer of thanksgiving over the meal.

The key action during the Preparation of the Gifts is the procession to bring the gifts to the altar. This procession, though brief and generally simple, is more than merely a practical matter of getting the bread and wine to the altar. It is an expression of our own preparation for entering into Christ's sacrifice. On Holy Thursday, the rubrics suggest that the whole assembly process to the altar with gifts for the poor. Even when only a few members of the assembly form the procession, they represent all of us. Their movement to the altar suggests the movement of our hearts toward the Lord and our willingness to share in the sacrifice offered on that altar.

Senior members among us may remember being taught to place themselves on the paten with the host when it was offered to God during the Offertory. The only problem with that approach is that the bread is not being offered to God. Only after it becomes the body of Christ is the sacrifice offered. Yet the image still has value. As the bread and the wine are prepared and placed on the altar, we can mentally place ourselves there, too, prepared to give of ourselves as Christ did, ready to share in his sacrificial offering.

This time to prepare ourselves during Mass can bring to completion our efforts to prepare ourselves all week. We are continually called to give of ourselves as Christ did, in loving service to our neighbors. We might begin each day with a prayer that we will always be ready to link ourselves to Christ's sacrifice, whether in church or wherever we happen to be.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 16: How Much Does it Cost?

As the ushers came around with the collection basket one Sunday, a small boy leaned over to his father and said, "You don't have to pay for me, Dad. I'm under five." Another youngster, listening to her mother complaining about the quality of the music and the preaching as they left Mass, said, "You have to admit, Mom. It wasn't a bad show for a nickel!"

Both children share the same misconception about the meaning of the collection at Mass. They see it as the price of admission, but there is no admission required here. How might we explain to them what the collection really means?

The official books tell us very little. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, as it describes the procession with the gifts, simply says: "It is well also that money or other gifts for the poor or for the Church, brought by the faithful or collected in the church, should be received" (# 73).

Most pastors and parish finance councils, on the other hand, see the collection as absolutely essential to keeping the parish going. Its practical value is obvious. It takes a lot of money to maintain buildings and programs and to keep the light and heat and air conditioning going.

The role of the collection during Mass, however, goes beyond the practical goal of meeting the annual budget. Remember that the collection takes place during the Preparation of the Gifts, and the money we give is carried forward as part of the procession with the bread and wine. The point of the collection, then, has something to do with preparing ourselves to enter into the sacrifice of Christ.

In our culture, money is a powerful symbol of ourselves. The process of getting it and spending it tends to dominate our lives. So when we give some of it back to God, we express our willingness to give ourselves to God.

It is not just a matter of giving God one or two percent of our income or even of tithing ten percent to God. In biblical times, the Jews made an offering of the first fruits of the harvest. It was a sign of gratitude for the harvest but also a symbol that the whole harvest really belonged to God. What we give in the collection should be a symbol of all that we have. It is a reminder that everything we own is a gift from God. Our gift in the collection is both a sign of our gratitude and a symbol that we will use all of God's gifts as God wills.

Notice, too, that the General Instruction speaks of gifts for the poor or for the Church. We need to remember that our gifts must do more than ensure our own comfort and our own programs in the parish. At least part of what we give must go to the poor if we are really to imitate our Lord. In this way, too, what we put in the collection prepares us to share in Christ's sacrifice, for it expresses our willingness to care for those in need and to give ourselves to others in love as he did.

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Article 17: We All Give Thanks and Praise

How many of you know when the Eucharistic Prayer begins? The first part of this central prayer of the Mass is a variable section called the Preface. That term does not mean that it is a preliminary section like the preface of a book; it comes from a Latin word that simply means a proclamation. In the preface we proclaim our praise of God, focusing on one or several aspects of God's wondrous works on our behalf.

The Preface itself begins with that standard dialogue that we all can recite in our sleep: The Lord be with you. And also with you. Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give him thanks and praise.

This simple ritual dialogue tells us a couple of very important things about the Eucharistic Prayer. The first is that the prayer involves us all. Though the priest proclaims most of the prayer alone, right at the beginning we are reminded that we have a part to play. Notice the plural terms: We lift them up to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord.

This is not a private prayer of the priest but a communal prayer that he proclaims in our name. As we move through the prayer, we continue to respond to what the priest proclaims. We sing the Holy, Holy at the end of the Preface. We sing the Memorial Acclamation after the account of the Last Supper. And we affirm and conclude the whole prayer with our Great Amen. This is a prayer that belongs to us all. We offer it to the Father together, united with Christ our head.

The second thing the preface dialogue reminds us is that the Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of thanks and praise. "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give him thanks and praise." This is also reflected in the very name of the prayer; the word Eucharist, you may recall, comes from the Latin for thanksgiving. We gather every week to thank God for all the gifts we have received from the hand of the Lord. We praise God for God's goodness and love, revealed to us through Jesus Christ.

This central prayer of the Mass, then, calls for our full attention and participation. We need to listen carefully to the words of the Eucharistic Prayer and make them our own prayer by responding with the sung acclamations. We need to truly lift up our hearts and give thanks and praise to God.

This will be easier if we take a few moments before we come to Mass to recall some of the reasons we have to be grateful to God. We always give thanks for our salvation through Christ, but we should also be thankful for the many blessings we receive each week. Perhaps we should take a few moments each night to reflect on the blessings of the day. If we give God thanks each day, then we might be better prepared to do that together here on Sunday.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 18: Sharing Christ's Sacrifice

Most Catholics are familiar with our tradition of calling the Mass a sacrifice. It is less clear whether most Catholics understand **how** the Mass is a sacrifice and what it means for us to make that claim.

Let's begin with Christ's own sacrifice. His sacrifice has both historical and eternal aspects. The core of his sacrifice was expressed in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done." His sacrifice was his surrender to the Father's will in all things, no matter what that might cost. This commitment led to his death and resurrection, historical events that are not repeated. But his surrender to the Father's will is eternal, and it is that aspect of his sacrifice that we are invited to share.

The Eucharistic Prayer is based on Jewish prayer forms. It begins with praise of God and then recalls many reasons we have to be thankful to God. Then it asks God to continue to work wonders in our own time and concludes with a final acclamation of praise. In the Christian versions of this prayer, what God has done for us culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We recall what Jesus did so that we might unite ourselves with his sacrifice. The First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation prays: "Father, look with love on those you have called to share in the one sacrifice of Christ."

To do that means to surrender our wills to the Father's will just as he did. It means being willing to give ourselves for others as he did. It means being willing to accept whatever comes as a result of our faithfulness to the Father's will. For Jesus, that meant death on the cross and resurrection to new life. Most of us will not hang from a wooden cross, but all of us have to embrace the crosses that life brings us. We share in Christ's sacrifice to the extent that we embrace his attitude, his act of will, his relationship with the Father.

In this process, we become one with Christ and are caught up in his offering of himself to the Father. Listen to the words of the Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation: "We celebrate the memory of his death and resurrection and bring you the gift you have given us, the sacrifice of reconciliation. Therefore, we ask you, Father, to accept us, together with your Son." There is only one acceptable sacrifice in the New Covenant, but by uniting ourselves to Christ we become part of that one sacrifice.

Of course, sharing in Christ's sacrificial act here at Mass is not enough. If we join him in his surrender to the Father's will here, then we have to live that out all through the week. The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer asks God to "gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise." We are to live as members of Christ, giving constant praise to God by our daily lives. That is the way that we truly share Christ's sacrifice, and it is that kind of faithful living that makes what we do here true and authentic worship.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 19: We Dare To Say Amen

Four-letter words can get you in trouble. Your mother probably taught you that when you were very young. In the liturgy we frequently use a four-letter word, and it can get us in trouble, too. It's a word that we adopted directly from the Hebrew language. The word is Amen.

If you ask most people how to translate Amen, they will say it means "So be it." That is a valid definition. Amen is a word that expresses our assent to what has preceded it.

Think of all the times we say Amen during Mass. At the beginning we say Amen to the sign of the cross. We agree that we are worshipping in the name of the Trinity. We say Amen to several shorter prayers during the Mass: the concluding prayer in the penitential rite, the opening prayer of the Mass, the concluding prayer of the petitions, the prayer over the gifts and the prayer after communion. In all these, our Amen makes the prayers our own, affirming what has been spoken in our name. We say Amen at the end of the Glory to God and the Profession of Faith. With these two Amens, we express our agreement with the praise offered to God and the faith that we share.

Our most significant Amens, however, come at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and at the reception of Communion. In different ways, these Amens express our willingness to join ourselves with Christ and embrace his sacrifice.

At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, we generally sing the Great Amen three times. This Amen says that we accept and affirm all that has been proclaimed in the prayer, especially the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ.

Scholars tell us that the root word in early Hebrew from which Amen comes means "to pound in one's tent stake." If you remember that early Hebrew means when they were wandering in the desert, and if you know that you do not live long in the desert without a tent to shield you from the heat of the midday sun and from the cold of the desert night, then this phrase sounds a lot like our expression "I'd stake my life on it."

That is the deeper meaning of Amen. When we sing Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, we proclaim that we will stake our life on the paschal mystery, that we are willing to die to self in order to rise to new life, that we will accept whatever comes from following the Father's will as Jesus did.

At Communion, we say Amen when we receive the body and blood of the Lord. This is more than agreeing that the bread and wine are Christ's body and blood. We accept the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of Christ poured out for us. We recognize that we are part of the body of Christ who shares this communion together. We express our willingness to be the body of Christ in the world today and to pour out our lives for the sake of others.

Be careful when you say Amen. This four letter word can get you in trouble because of what it requires of you.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 20: The Words That Jesus Gave Us

If there is any prayer that could be called the model Christian prayer, it would surely be the Our Father. We call it the Lord's Prayer, because it was given by Jesus to the disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray.

This is a prayer that has been used by Christians ever since, often several times a day. Early Christian writers speak of praying the Lord's Prayer every morning, at midday and every night. It has been the constant companion of Christians for two thousand years.

Since the early centuries of the Church's history, this prayer has also been used as part of our immediate preparation for receiving Communion. There are several aspects of the prayer that make it particularly appropriate for this part of the Mass.

First, of course, is the fact that this prayer prays for our daily bread. While this means more than just the Eucharist, it naturally calls to mind the Lord's gift of his body and blood as our food and drink. Second, it speaks of the forgiveness that enables the community to be reconciled with one another just as we are reconciled with God. Third, this prayer is addressed to Our Father, reminding us that we are one family in Christ as we come to share at the table of the Lord.

When this prayer first became part of the Mass, it was commonly said after the breaking of the bread. Near the beginning of the seventh century, Pope St. Gregory the Great moved it to its current position because he saw it as closely linked to the Eucharistic Prayer. It echoes the concerns of the Eucharistic Prayer that God be praised, that God's kingdom might come, and that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. Making this prayer our own can be a way of expressing some of the implications of our Amen to the Eucharistic Prayer.

Some people have become accustomed to holding hands during this prayer to express our unity. Others have learned to raise their hands in prayer. Neither gesture is prescribed in the official books, nor is either forbidden. Perhaps one of these locally developing trends will lead someday to a formal rubric in the liturgy.

The final petition of the prayer has long been expanded to ask for peace. This expansion, called the embolism, is followed by the acclamation "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours ...". The Byzantine Rite, one of the Eastern rites of the Church, normally concludes the Lord's Prayer with this acclamation, as do many of our brothers and sisters in other Christian churches. It seems to have been added to the prayer originally so that it would end on a more positive note than "deliver us from evil."

We say this prayer so often that it is good for us now and then to make a conscious effort to think about what we are saying. It is a prayer that challenges us to work for the things we pray for—to remember that we are one family, to make God's name holy, to work for the kingdom, to do God's will, to share our daily bread, to forgive as we are forgiven and to struggle against evil. It is a good prayer to pray several times a day.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 21: Sharing the Peace of Christ

“Hey, Father. Why don't we move the sign of peace to the beginning of Mass so that we would greet each other as we start rather than waiting until Communion time?” Many pastors have heard that suggestion over the years. It has this element of truth: We should greet one another as we gather for worship. The body of Christ needs to assemble as one body, and that means we need to be hospitable toward everyone who gathers with us.

That is not the purpose of the sign of peace, however. This ancient ritual gesture was restored to our liturgy after the Second Vatican Council. Though it had once found its place after the General Intercessions, for many centuries the Roman Rite has made it part of our preparation for Communion.

The earlier spot for this gesture placed it before the presentation of the gifts, linking it to Christ's command: “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

Putting the sign of peace within the Communion Rite serves a similar function. It reminds us that we dare not approach the altar of the Lord for Communion if we are not willing to be reconciled with the other members of Christ's body. Some people have complained that the sign of peace interrupts their preparation for Communion, but this suggests that they really don't understand the meaning of Communion. Communion unites us with every member of Christ's body. Anything that separates us from one another needs to be surrendered before we approach the table. The sign of peace gives us an opportunity to express our unity. This may mean reconciling with someone who is estranged from us, or it may simply mean reminding ourselves that we belong to one another. In both cases, we will be better prepared to enter into Communion with one another in Christ.

The peace that we wish for one another is the peace of Christ, the peace that Christ promised those who live in him. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means more than the absence of war or conflict. It suggests a state of complete harmony with God, with nature, with others and with ourselves. That's the gift we seek for ourselves and for all our brothers and sisters.

Part of the problem in understanding the sign of peace, perhaps, is our custom of using just a handshake for this ritual. This gesture suggests a standard greeting rather than a prayerful wish for Christ's peace. The official books simply say that we should make an appropriate sign of peace according to local custom. Perhaps we might try a two-handed handclasp to remind ourselves that this means more than a simple hello.

However you make the gesture, it fulfills its function if it makes us more aware of the love of Christ that binds us to one another. That's what Communion strengthens, and the sign of peace points the way.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 22: They Recognized Him In the Breaking of the Bread

When the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus invited him to join them for dinner, Luke's gospel tells us, they "recognized him in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). A bit later the book of Acts describes the life of the early Church this way: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

So "the breaking of the bread" was a phrase that early Christians used to describe the Mass. This ritual gesture was seen as central to the meaning of what they did when they gathered on Sunday.

The term can remind us of two significant points. We use the term "breaking bread" with friends or family as a way of speaking about sharing a meal together. Using this phrase to describe the Eucharist reminds us that the central ritual of our faith is a meal that we share with Christ. We spoke several weeks ago of the Mass as a sacrifice. It is also a meal. We might call it a sacrificial meal or a sacrifice in the form of a meal. Jesus chose a meal as the fundamental symbol of the Eucharist, and he reveals his presence in the breaking of the bread.

The breaking of the bread is a practical prerequisite for sharing a meal. In an age of pre-sliced loaves, we may need to remember that, in ancient times, bread was not sliced but commonly broken and shared. So the breaking of the bread speaks first of sharing, and thus it speaks of the union that we call Communion. Our liturgical prayers often speak of our sharing one bread and one cup as a symbol of our unity in the one Christ. We break the bread in order to share the one loaf.

This practical action, however, has also taken on a symbolic meaning. Christ's body was broken for us and his blood was poured out for us. So breaking the bread also reminds us of Christ's sacrifice. In the process, it reminds us of our commitment to share in his sacrifice. If we love as he did, we have to be willing to allow ourselves to be broken and our energy poured out. We have to be willing to allow ourselves to be consumed by others. We have to be willing to be the body of Christ, and that means we have to be willing to nourish those around us.

We do not do this exactly as Christ does, of course. We are broken and poured out and consumed figuratively, but the commitment is the same as that of Jesus. It is our willingness to love as deeply and as widely as he does that is crucial.

This deeper meaning of the ritual action is emphasized by the song that accompanies it. The "Lamb of God" speaks of Jesus as the lamb of sacrifice, who takes away the sins of the world and grants us peace.

The breaking of the bread is another element of the Communion Rite that helps us prepare ourselves to enter into intimate union with Christ and with all our brothers and sisters.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 23: You Are What You Eat

Have you ever seen that poster that pictures a whole array of junk food with these words: “You are what you eat”? It's intended to make us think a little more about what we put into our mouths.

Centuries ago St. Augustine had a similar goal and used similar language. “Receive what you are,” he wrote. “If you are his body and members of him, then you will find set on the Lord's table your own mystery. Yes, you receive your own mystery” (*Sermo 272*: PL 38, 1247, cited in Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* # 40)

This is a fundamental insight into the meaning of the Eucharist. There is an intimate connection between the body of Christ we receive from the altar and the body of Christ that comes to the altar. The core mystery of the Eucharist lies in this connection between the sacramental body and the mystical body of Christ that is the Church.

It is instructive to note that when Christians in the first thousand years of our history spoke of the mystical body, they meant the sacrament. The real body of Christ, they believed, was the community of believers. In the past thousand years we have reversed the language, so we talk about the sacramental body as real and call the Church the mystical body of Christ. One could defend either pattern. The point is that these two forms of Christ's body are so closely linked that we can interchange their names.

This link also points us to the purpose of the Eucharist and the real meaning of Communion. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, taught that the goal of the Eucharist is the unity of the Church. Christ did not give us this sacrament to turn bread and wine into his body and blood. It does that, but the purpose of the Eucharist is to transform us into his body.

We became members of Christ's body when we were baptized. The Eucharist renews and strengthens the unity of the body of Christ. When we come to the table and share the body and blood of the Lord, we are committing ourselves to live as the body of Christ. St. Augustine put it this way: “You reply 'Amen' to that which you are, and by replying you consent. For you hear 'The Body of Christ' and you reply 'Amen . . .' Be what you see, and receive what you are.”

In his apostolic letter titled *The Day of the Lord*, Pope John Paul II insists that it is important “to be ever mindful that communion with Christ is deeply tied to communion with our brothers and sisters. The Sunday Eucharistic gathering is an experience of brotherhood, which the celebration should demonstrate clearly, while ever respecting the nature of the liturgical action” (*Dies Domini*, # 44).

Receiving Communion brings us into an intimate union with Christ, but that intimacy can never exclude those around us. When we share the body and blood of the Lord, we are united not only with the head of the body but also with every member of the body of Christ. That's the purpose of the Eucharist, and that's why we call it Communion.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 24: Jesus Meant What He Said

You have probably heard about the survey done a few years back that suggested that many Catholics today don't really believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist truly become the body and blood of the Lord. There are serious doubts about the accuracy of such surveys, but it seems a good idea to recall the Church's ancient teaching.

To put it simply, the Church has always believed that Jesus meant what he said. At the Last Supper, as we recall in every Mass, he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body which will be given up for you." After the meal he took the cup filled with wine, gave God thanks and praise and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant."

Notice that Jesus does not say that the bread and wine are only signs of his body and blood. He says, "This is my body; this is the cup of my blood." We take him at his word. Now, of course, we don't believe that the bread becomes a piece of flesh. Christ's physical body was his way of being fully present with us, and now he takes bread and wine and says that these will be his way of being fully present, physically present with us.

How this is possible is ultimately a mystery. The Church has used the term "transubstantiation" to express the truth that the substance, the deep reality, of the bread becomes Christ's body. But this does not explain how. The best we can say is that it is by the power of Christ's word and the action of the Holy Spirit. We can't explain just how, but we believe that Jesus meant what he said.

Jesus also meant what he said when he told us all to take and eat and to take and drink. For too many centuries, Catholics received Communion under only the species of bread. This was a reaction to a medieval heresy that said you didn't really receive Christ if you only received one species. After that issue faded, the Protestants restored both species, so the Catholic Church did not. Judging that this reason, too, was no longer valid, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of Communion under both species.

Bread, the staff of life, speaks of sustenance. Wine speaks of the spirit and the joy of life. Christ used both to communicate the fullness of his being. He intends us to receive both. Sharing the bread reminds us of our unity in one body. Sharing the cup speaks of sharing in the covenant, as Jesus' words indicate. It reminds us, too, that we share the same lifeblood with Christ and with one another. Those who cannot drink any alcohol and those who cannot eat any wheat can, of course, receive under only one species. It's still the whole Jesus. Nevertheless, receiving both the body and the blood is a more complete form of Communion and a "fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet" (GIRM, # 281). Besides, it's what the Lord told us to do, and he meant what he said.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 25: Expressing Our Communion

Liturgy is faith made visible. When we celebrate the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, we express what we believe in word and song and action. Sometimes when the liturgy is reformed, it requires us to relearn what the Church really teaches about its meaning.

This may be especially true of our understanding of Holy Communion. For many generations, the liturgy was celebrated without much active involvement by most of the people present. This led us to develop habits and ways of thinking about the liturgy that were very individualistic. We learned to think of Communion as a very private moment between each of us and Jesus.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it overlooks the central meaning and purpose of the Eucharist. Jesus gave us the Eucharist to make us one body in him, so Communion is never a private moment between the individual and the Lord. It is a very personal moment, but it is also communal, for it involves all those around us who share the same body and blood.

There are two primary ways that we express our unity in Christ at the moment of Communion. The first is to join in the Communion procession. As we move to the table of the Lord, we form one procession, a pilgrim people on the move together. Thus it makes sense that we should all stay standing until the procession is completed. A procession is a communal action, a group movement. It is more than just individuals going to the table. We go as one people, as one body of Christ. Respect for each member of the assembly in the procession calls for us to remain standing until all have received.

The second way we express our unity at Communion, as we do throughout the Mass, is with singing. The Communion song is supposed to begin when the priest receives Communion and continue until the last person has received. The singing accompanies the procession in which we are all involved. All of us should be singing throughout, except when we are actually receiving the bread and wine. Even when moving in the procession, we can at least sing the refrain of the song.

When the procession is finished, the singing stops and we all sit together for some time of silent prayer. This is also a shared activity, a time to rest and pray together in the joy of our communion with Christ and one another. Many of us are used to time for quiet prayer as soon as we have received Communion. The liturgy simply calls us to wait until all have received so that we can share this quiet time together.

When we come to the minister of the body of Christ, we bow our heads and say “Amen” to express our reverence for Christ's presence there. We do the same when we come to the minister of the blood of Christ. With our voices and our bodies, we acknowledge the Lord's presence in the bread and wine. Remembering that he is also present in all those who share the meal with us, we use our voices and our bodies to acknowledge his presence there, too. By maintaining a common posture and joining in the singing, we proclaim our faith in the presence of the Lord in all his members as we share his holy meal. It should be obvious to anyone who watches us that we reverence Christ in one another as well as in the bread and wine. Liturgy makes our faith visible.

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 26: Sent Forth To Be Christ

When your heart beats, it draws blood into it, and then sends it to the lungs to take on oxygen. Then the blood is pulled back into the heart and finally sent back through your body to keep you alive. If the heart only took blood in and didn't send it back out, it wouldn't do you much good.

The liturgy is something like a heart. It draws us in when we have been depleted of spiritual energy. It links us to Christ, who revives our spirits and gives us strength. Then it sends us back out into the world.

This sending forth is the final section of the Eucharist. We call it the dismissal, but that's a word that can easily be misunderstood. We might think of dismissal time at school, the time we were finally free to do what we wanted. Or we might think of soldiers dismissed from formation. Dismissal can sound like simply the end of some gathering.

The dismissal from the Eucharist is more than that. The formula of dismissal in Latin is *Ite, missa est*. That's a very difficult phrase to translate. Our current translation is, "Go, the Mass is ended," but that is a bit weak. Translated literally, the Latin means "Go, it is the sending." Perhaps a little more elegant translation into English would be "Go, you are sent." The very word we commonly use for our Sunday worship, the Mass, comes from this dismissal. The Mass is for mission; it strengthens us to send us out again.

When we are dismissed from the liturgy, we are sent forth to carry on the work of Christ in the world. We respond: "Thanks be to God." That almost sounds as if we're just grateful it's over! What it really means is that we are grateful to God for entrusting this sacred mission to us and for strengthening us through the Eucharist to be able to carry it out.

Before the actual dismissal, we hear announcements for the week. The reason they come at this point in the liturgy is that they should be telling us ways that we can carry on our mission during the week. Here we receive the information we need for our "assignments" for the Lord. Then we pray for God's blessing before we are formally sent out on mission.

Of course, in most parishes, we actually conclude with a final song that accompanies the procession of the ministers through the assembly. That means that the liturgy is not over until the song is finished. It is really scandalous in some parishes to see many people leaving early. Some leave during Communion itself. Others leave as soon as the song begins. It's time to end this disrespectful habit. Basic courtesy and respect for the Lord and for our brothers and sisters requires all of us to stay in our places singing until the final song is concluded.

Even then, we don't have to make a mad dash for the parking lot. If we care about our brothers and sisters here, some time in conversation and fellowship after Mass is certainly appropriate. Some people may have pressing obligations that require them to leave quickly, but most of us could linger a bit with one another to share our joy in the Lord. Then we go forth to bring Christ to all those we meet throughout the week.