

**A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
MAKING MASS MATTER
TO SEEKERS, MARGINAL CATHOLICS, CATECHUMENS,
PARENTS, TEENS, AND EVERYONE IN YOUR PARISH**

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WHY DO THE THINGS WE DO AT MASS MATTER?

Some time ago, I was giving a workshop on how parishes could improve their liturgy. A man in the back row stood up and told us all that we were wasting our time. As long as we had a validly ordained priest who was consecrating the Body and Blood of Jesus, that was all that mattered. That should be good enough for anybody, he thought.

I was raised Catholic, so I can see his point. In Catholic grade school, we were taught that the moment of consecration was the moment Jesus became really and truly present on the altar. It was a miracle that we all believed in—and that I still believe in.

But if the consecration is all that matters, you have to wonder why we bother with all the rest of the Mass. Why not just have a priest say the words of consecration and cut out all the excess?

WHY NOT JUST HAVE A PRIEST SAY THE WORDS OF CONSECRATION AND CUT OUT ALL THE EXCESS?

Or to ask the question differently, why do the things we do at Mass matter?

What we do at Mass matters because the way we pray changes the world. I know that's a pretty bold statement, but it's true.

When the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, it's not just the things on the altar that are changed. We are also changed.

And when we then go out into the world, as people changed to be more one with Christ and more like Christ, we cause more change to happen in our neighborhoods, our schools, our businesses, and our families.

When we celebrate liturgy well, there are four general things that get changed.

1. PEOPLE BECOME LESS INDIVIDUALISTIC

Liturgy that follows good ritual principles invites and even requires active participation on the part of those in the room. Liturgy is like symphony. It requires lots of players who are paying attention even when they are not "on."

To make the symphony work, everyone has to pull their own weight. You can't just sit there. You have to keep time, pay attention to the flow, and come in at the right time without missing a beat. At that moment when it is time to sound your note, the entire symphony depends upon you.

Liturgy works exactly the same way. Knowing that the success of the liturgy hinges on you as much as on everyone else in the room is bracing. And it transforms people who really get it.

2. PEOPLE WILL TAKE GOD OFF THE PEDESTAL

People who try to pray by themselves—or who don't pray at all—make stuff up about God. They tend to make God into either a bully or a distant Father who isn't around very much. When people say they don't "believe" in God, it's usually the God they made up that they don't believe in.

WHEN PEOPLE SAY THEY DON'T "BELIEVE" IN GOD, IT'S USUALLY THE GOD THEY MADE UP THAT THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN.

Or, at the other extreme, some people work so hard at trying to get God's attention or stay on God's good side that they go overboard with devotions and pietistic practices and generally become annoying to the people around them.

God isn't like anything we can make up. St. John (and lots of other saints) tells us that God is love. Think of someone you truly love and who truly loves you. That person doesn't bully you. You don't have to work for that person's attention. You don't have to worry that he or she is going to fall out of love. When we are worshiping with others who also love God, we experience firsthand all the many ways that God loves us. And that's just life-changing.

3. PEOPLE WILL BECOME MORE ENTHUSIASTIC

A couple of years ago, I was meeting a friend for a drink in downtown San José. At the time, the San José Sharks were in the National Hockey League playoffs. I'm not much of a hockey fan, so I wasn't really aware they were playing on the day and time of my meeting.

I did notice the game was on in the bar when I walked in, but we got a table pretty far away from the TV. Ten or twenty minutes after we sat down, the place erupted in cheers. I almost cheered myself, just because everybody else was cheering. It was contagious.

Good liturgy is like that.

You can walk in on a Sunday, expecting to be bored, not really caring, and you get caught up in the passion. You are changed by the enthusiasm of those around you. You become a cheerleader yourself.

4. PEOPLE WILL GET JUSTICE

This is the most important benefit of well-celebrated liturgy.

The reason Christ becomes present in the liturgy and the reason Christ became present in the world in the first place was to proclaim good news to the poor.

The essential message of Christ is that the oppressed will be set free. In the liturgy, we hear that message and rehearse that message with each other.

The liturgy changes us into agents for justice. And then we go out into the world and live in a way that makes the world a more just place.

HOW TO MAKE ALL THIS REALLY WORK

What we're going to look at in the rest of the chapters is how to shape the experience of Sunday liturgy so all four of these things happen:

1. People will become less individualistic
2. People will take God off the pedestal
3. People will become more enthusiastic
4. People will get justice

Some of these things will be simple to do.

Some of these things some will be difficult to do.

Some might happen sooner than others.

But there is no time to start like the present.

NEXT ACTION

Before we move on to the next chapter, pray over the readings for this coming Sunday.

Ask yourself what message the Lord is trying to give you, at this time, right now in your life.

Then pay attention at Mass to everything that affirms that message.

You can find the Sunday readings
here:
<http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/>

HOSPITALITY IS MORE THAN JUST BEING NICE TO PEOPLE

A radically participative parish will have four faces it shows to the world. Strangers will see these faces on their first visit to the parish, and the parish will be “known” in the diocese for these characteristics. The four faces of a participative parish are:

- hospitality
- energy (Spirit)
- faith
- mission

HOSPITALITY

Fourteen hundred years ago, St. Benedict wrote in his Rule, “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, “I came as a guest, and you received me” (Mt 25:35).

If we are going to become participative, vibrant communities that make Mass matter, we have to turn around. While most of us are looking for Christ “up front,” Christ is coming in the doors at the back of the church. Having ushers and greeters at the doors is great, but it’s not enough. My third-grade teacher used to ask us, “If Jesus came to your house, would you be able to show him where your Bible is?”

I was so worried wondering if we even had a Bible that it didn’t occur to me to be amazed that Jesus might come to my house. And yet he does, all the time.

THE BENEDICTINE RULE IS THIS: ANY GUEST IS LIKE CHRIST.

JESUS IS COMING TO YOUR HOUSE

The Benedictine Rule is this: any guest is like Christ. If Jesus came to my house, I would not send a greeter to the door while I went to look for my Bible. And, in a similar way, we should not rely only on greeters to welcome guests at our church while we busily attend to celebrating the Mass.

I’m not suggesting all 700 people in the pews crowd around every person who comes to the door. However, every guest ought to feel that kind of attention. They should feel overwhelmed with welcome.

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATING A HOSPITABLE ATMOSPHERE:

- The pastor, even if he is not the presider at that Mass, is outside or in the back of church greeting people as they arrive.
- The ushers are not only keeping a look out for newcomers (as opposed to their buddies), they are also handing out hymnals already opened to the gathering song. Even if you store your hymnals in the pews, the ushers should have a few that they hand to the guests.
- Regular parishioners in the pews move over to make room for guests instead of making them crawl past to a seat in the middle of the pew.
- People say hello to each other. Regular parishioners go out of their way to say hello to guests and even shake their hands.
- No one is shy about helping guests who are unfamiliar with the Mass find their way around the hymnal or the worship aid. Every adult in the parish knows how to find the outline of the Mass at the front of the hymnal and how to help guests follow it.
- The location of the bathrooms is not a parish secret, but is clearly indicated by signs.
- The Sunday bulletin is written and edited in plain English without using Catholic acronyms, jargon, or parish code language.
- Everyone in the parish, even the children, feels like it is his or her personal responsibility to watch for guests and reach out to them every Sunday—just as if they were Christ.
- Hospitality is much more than being nice to people. It is dying to self. It is putting the needs of others before one's own. The guests at our liturgies may not know it, but they are primary symbolic elements of our worship. The guests symbolize the poor, the marginalized, the prisoner, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the underserved in our society that Jesus came to serve.
- Every Sunday is a rehearsal in "foot washing." We remove the garment of our personal security and shyness, wrap it around our waist, and kneel our egos down in front of the guests before us. We pour the waters of welcome over their feet and dry them with our towels of comfort and love. And all this is merely practice for how we are to live in the world. If we cannot even welcome, as though they were Christ, the guests who come to our churches, we will have little chance of welcoming the marginalized in society whom Jesus places at the head of the table.

NEXT ACTION

Just as you did before, pray over the readings for this coming Sunday.

Meditate on the instances in which Jesus acted in a hospitable way.

Then choose two actions from the bullet points above to implement in your circle of influence—even if that's just you!



YOUR PARISH'S DIVINE FUEL SOURCE

A participating community is energized or spirited.

Before reading this chapter, read the Pentecost story: [Acts 2:1-11](#).

As you read the Pentecost story, keep in mind that while most Catholics know this story, very few of them have ever read it in the Bible. They know it because they've heard it proclaimed at Mass on Pentecost Sunday.

Keep in mind that for most of the catechumens, the first time they will hear this story is at Mass on Pentecost Sunday.

And keep in mind that the first time the neophytes hear this story as fully participating members of the Body will be eight Sundays after their baptism, at Mass on Pentecost Sunday.

In other words, for most Catholics, this is not a story that is associated with the history of first-century Jerusalem. It is a living testament that is part of their ongoing celebration of the liturgy.

In that context, we hear proclaimed:

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2:1-4)

LUKE'S UNIQUE VISION

Since Luke, the author of Acts, was not one of the original disciples, he was not there to witness this event. And, if you read John's eyewitness account of the sending of the Spirit (Jn 20:19-23, also proclaimed on Pentecost Sunday), it didn't happen this way at all. It didn't even happen on Pentecost.

So what is Luke up to?

Luke is describing the effects of a community that is filled with the Spirit, which he can attest to personally. Luke has experienced life in the Spirit. So when he sets out to write an account of the sending of that Spirit, he wants to use language and images that will communicate the power of that Spirit.

Luke lived in a driven community, a community propelled to mission as if by hurricane force. The Spirit was in and through his community as though it were a strong, driving wind. Luke's community was on fire with the Spirit. He could see it in their faces when they talked about their faith, when they gathered for prayer, when they went out to serve the poor. They glowed with God's Spirit, as though someone had lit them on fire like torches.

Luke's community not only welcomed strangers, they went out to find them.

LUKE'S COMMUNITY NOT ONLY WELCOMED STRANGERS, THEY WENT OUT TO FIND THEM.

They didn't worry that the strangers were from different cultures or different neighborhoods or different socio-economic groups.

They knew their message of good news was a universal message that could be communicated to anyone. They didn't need to speak the language of commerce or politics or religion or philosophy.

They only needed to speak of God's love. That was a universal language people of every nation, of every tongue, understood.

Luke's community was fired up. An energetic, spirited community catechizes about the mission we are baptized into.

We are not dejected, forlorn messengers of doom.

Jesus enjoyed life and was so passionate about being in the thick of things, he sometimes wore himself out.

By bringing an energetic spirit to the liturgy and using that energy to enliven our celebration, we learn how to communicate the joy and energy of God's Spirit to the world.

We will know our communities are initiating communities when guests are "blown over" and "fired up" by the energy they experience in our liturgies.

HOW TO FIRE UP YOUR LITURGY:

- Set a conversational tone as people gather for worship, recognizing Christ in each other.
- Sing a gathering song the community knows by heart.
- Encourage heartfelt and hearty responses to the prayers.
- Train for purposeful and sure-footed movement by all the ministers of the liturgy.
- Train for spirited and excellent proclamation of the readings in such a way that the assembly believes the message being proclaimed.
- Be an engaging and engaged presider. Preach a homily that is a passionate statement of faith.
- Plan a communion procession that does not lag, one in which everyone participates and everyone stands in solidarity with all who are sharing Christ's Body and Blood. Communion, especially Communion, is not a time for kneeling in private prayer.
- Eliminate or curtail announcements, second collections, and extralitururgical talks or meditations.
- Give a final blessing that encourages, empowers, and enables the assembly to go out and engage in the mission of the gospel in their daily lives.
- Foster a community that "hangs out" after Mass, chatting and connecting with one another because they are in no hurry to leave.

NEXT ACTION

Pray over the readings from Pentecost Sunday.

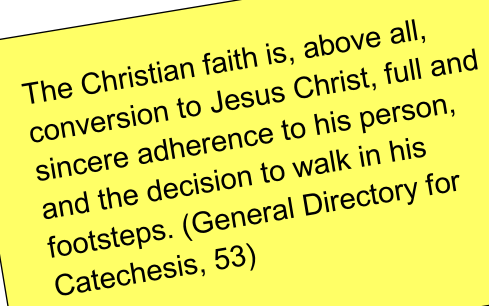
Then choose two actions from the bullet points above to implement as you are able in your parish setting.

READINGS FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

| | | | | |
|--------|-------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Year A | Acts 2:1-11 | Ps 104:1+24, 29-30, 31+34 | 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13 | John 20:19- 23 |
| Year B | Acts 2:1-11 | Ps 104:1+24, 29-30, 31+34 | Gal 5:16-25 | John 15:26- 27; 16:12-15 |
| Year C | Acts 2:1-11 | Ps 104:1+24, 29-30, 31+34 | Rom 8:8-17 | John 14:15- 16, 23b-26 |

ANCHOR YOUR PARISH IN FAITH

A participative community is filled with faith. Participative communities fully live out the call of Jesus, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).



The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person, and the decision to walk in his footsteps. (General Directory for Catechesis, 53)

Participative communities will be instantly recognizable as communities of Jesus Christ. Strangers will see ready evidence of Christ-like activity in the community. They will see a community that is transformed in mind and heart to Gospel values.

Faith is a gift from God, and with the aid of God's Spirit, we say "yes" to that gift as Mary did.

But faith must be nurtured, especially in the liturgy. Faith can be weakened and even lost.

"Faith" is a difficult virtue to measure or gauge simply by the liturgical celebration alone. It is possible for a community to be competently celebrating liturgy, making good use of the liturgical arts, while at the same time their faith remains somewhat insular and isolated from their lives outside the liturgy.

The liturgy might be a superficial "show" that masks a weakened faith of its members. In reality, I don't think this can go on too long. A community that does not have a strong faith cannot sustain the energy it takes to celebrate a radically participative liturgy for very long. But during a given time, in a given community, it might exist for a little while.

STRONG LITURGY INDICATES STRONG FAITH

It is more often the case that liturgy that is well celebrated is an indicator of a strong faith community.

The U.S. bishops tell us:

Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it. (*Music in Catholic Worship*, 6)

There are some dangers to our faith when liturgy is poorly celebrated—individualism, piety, apathy, and oppression. A community that is celebrating liturgy well will strengthen their faith.

A COMMUNITY THAT IS CELEBRATING LITURGY WELL WILL STRENGTHEN THEIR FAITH.

A GLIMPSE OF LIFE IN CHRIST

In the liturgy, we learn what faith “looks like.” That is why good celebrations foster faith. Faith “looks like” the Body of Christ worshipping God.

- Faith is both heartfelt and sensible.
- It is both a divine gift and a human act.
- It is supernatural revelation and common sense.

We practice and celebrate all these dualities in the liturgy. The liturgy gives us a glimpse, in a mirror, dimly (1 Cor 13:12) of how life in Christ will ultimately be, and that gives us hope.

There are many definitions of faith, and one that I think is especially liturgical is found in the Letter to the Hebrews:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (11:1)

The liturgies celebrated in participative communities are the living embodiment of that idea.

A PARTICIPATIVE COMMUNITY THAT IS GROWING IN FAITH WILL BE CHARACTERIZED BY SEVERAL INDICATORS:

- **There will be a strong interest in the gospel.** The interest of faithful Christians is not merely in the texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but in the Logos, the living Word of God in the community and the world.
- **There will be signs of conversion.** A faith-filled, participative community will commit to measurable change every year and use the liturgy as a place to both effect and celebrate that change. A participative community will be able to clearly answer the question, “How are we different now than we were before?”
- **There will be an ongoing profession of faith.** This is more than the ability to recite the Creed. It is the ability to say clearly and meaningfully what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Members of participative communities will be able to say why they believe in Jesus in a way that sounds interesting and attractive to those who do not believe. They will be able to profess their faith in such a way that it gives hope and encouragement to one another.
- **There will be faith-filled homilies.** The one who preaches the homily at Eucharist is a symbol of Christ. As such, he lays open his heart for the sake of the community. He is the leader and model of how one professes one’s faith in a believing community.
- **The multiple ways we profess our faith during the liturgy will spill over** into a regular sharing of faith throughout the community during the week. This will happen in households and at parish meetings and gatherings. It will also happen in casual conversation both with believers and non-believers encountered in daily life. Liturgical faith will become a model for household faith.
- **Every “Amen” will be a statement of faith** and never a perfunctory response to a liturgical formula.
- **Participative communities will worship and live in such a way that strangers and guests will ask,** “Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?” (On Evangelization in the Modern World, 21).
- **Participative communities will be noted for “having “your answer ready** for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have’ (1 Pt 3:15)—and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus” (On Evangelization in the Modern World, 22).

NEXT ACTION

Reflect on these questions, and write down a few thoughts:

Does your experience of liturgy align with the bullet points above?

How does liturgy strengthen your faith?

Does liturgy give you hope?

In what ways could liturgy improve?



MISSION: THE REASON THE CHURCH EXISTS

Liturgy that is divorced or disassociated from the mission of Jesus Christ is not Christian liturgy. In a participative community, the reason for liturgy is to prepare us for mission.

We do not prepare by reading textbooks and hearing lectures.

We do not watch PowerPoint presentations on how to be missionaries.

We prepare as lovers do.

The U.S. bishops tell us in *Music in Catholic Worship*:

We come [to church] to acknowledge the love of God poured out among us in the work of the Spirit, to stand in awe and praise. (2) People in love make signs of love, not only to express their love but also to deepen it. Love never expressed dies. Christians' love for Christ and for one another and Christians' faith in Christ and in one another must be expressed in the signs and symbols of celebration or they will die. (4)

RENEW THE HUMAN RACE

To love Jesus is to devote our lives to Jesus.

It is to say "yes" to Jesus' entire being and to his prime directive to those who would follow him: "Go into the world; and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15).

Indeed, the reason the church exists is for "bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new" (On Evangelization in the Modern World, 18).

THIS PROCLAMATION OF THE GOOD NEWS IS ALWAYS FIRST OF ALL PROCLAIMED TO THE POOR.

This proclamation of the good news is always first of all proclaimed to the poor, and it is proclaimed in such a way that it sounds like good news.

To the hungry, good news is food.

To the sick, good news is healing.

To the oppressed, good news is justice.



Christ came to proclaim God's kingdom, a reign of peace and justice. We cannot authentically preach the good news of God's kingdom without actively working for the fullness of the reign of justice.

The Catechism says this:

In its various forms—material deprivation, unjust oppression, physical and psychological illness and death—human misery is the obvious sign of the inherited condition of frailty and need for salvation in which man finds himself as a consequence of original sin.

This misery elicited the compassion of Christ the Savior, who willingly took it upon himself and identified himself with the least of his brethren.

Hence, those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere. ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, instruction *Libertatis conscientia*, 68] 2448)

The liturgy rehearses us in this missionary activity in all the ways we have been speaking about: being a hospitable community, a Spirit-filled community, a community of faith. All of these virtues will prepare us for mission.

But even more deeply, the very structure of the liturgy itself and its celebration throughout the liturgical year form us for mission.

OUR MISSION IS, ACTUALLY, TO MAKE THE PASCHAL MYSTERY MANIFEST IN THE WORLD.

Our mission is, actually, to make the Paschal mystery manifest in the world in a way that is a clear and obvious challenge to the sinful structures that cause human misery. And the Paschal mystery, Christ's own suffering, death, and resurrection, is what the liturgy schools us in week in and week out.

LITURGY LEADS US TO MISSION

GATHER

The initiative in the mission is always God's. In the liturgy, that initiative is symbolized by the calling together of the community. God calls us, and we respond by gathering.

WORD

Once assembled, the Word of God is proclaimed. We hear, once again, of God's unconditional love for us. This is the good news that converts hearts. The good news liberates us and sets us free from all the misery that chains us and enslaves us.

God's liberating word is always creative. Every time God speaks, creation happens. In the beginning, what was created were the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the earth and the stars, human beings, the entire cosmos. God's creation is ongoing because God is still speaking to us. When God speaks in the liturgy, what is created is faith. We respond to that gift of faith the way our parents taught us to always respond to a giver of gifts: we give thanks.

THANKSGIVING

There are many ways to give thanks, but the way Christians give thanks is by sharing a meal. Why by sharing a meal? Because that is what Jesus told us to do when he said, "Do this in memory of me." That meal is no ordinary meal, however. In giving thanks, we tell the story of how we came to be liberated. The Eucharistic Prayer is a story of God's saving love throughout history. That love culminates in the breaking of Jesus' body and shedding of his blood. By eating and drinking that body and blood we are taking into us the very life, the real presence, of the Broken One.

That presence, as we've seen, is first of all a message of liberation to the poor. So we go out from the meal to do what we ate and drank. We go out from the meal to love as we have been loved, to be the body and blood of Christ.

MISSION

The way we be Christ is to tell others the good news—God loves them. God's liberating word is always creative. What gets created out in the world is faith. Hearts are changed. People convert. We are now in a new relationship with them. Through our new bond with them, God calls them to worship.

And the cycle begins again. This is the mission of the church. It is the reason we exist.

We practice this cycle in the liturgy and live it out in the world over and over again until God's love and justice have been proclaimed in every land and every heart has been changed.

We do this until Christ comes again in glory and all are united with him.

A PARTICIPATIVE COMMUNITY THAT IS IMMERSSED IN MISSION WILL HAVE MANY OF THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS:

- **They will faithfully celebrate the liturgical year.** Every member will make a diligent effort to be at every Sunday and feast day liturgy to help the community “learn” the fullness of the Paschal mystery.
- **Homilies will be centered on the gospel,** and the liturgy of the day and not omitted in favor of current-event topics, fundraising appeals, and worthy causes.
- **They will love the poor.** While there are many ways of showing such love, no one in the community will see such actions as secondary or “extra” to the mission of the parish.
- **They will teach their children** that “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life” ([St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in Lazaro 2, 5: PG 48, 992] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2446).
- **They will teach the catechumens** that “the demand of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2446).
- **They will initiate new members** on a regular basis. When good news is effectively proclaimed, hearts are converted. Evidence of that conversion will be seen by an increase in new workers in the vineyard. The mission of the church is symbolized in the deep structure of the eucharistic liturgy itself.

NEXT ACTION

Write down the next thing you will do to make Mass matter to your community. Choose just one step. Make it small enough to accomplish within the next thirty days, but big enough that it will stretch you.

Pass this resource on to someone else in your community, and ask them to join you in making Mass matter.

