

LITURGY



What is “Liturgy?”

In ancient Greek, the word “liturgy” denotes a kind of public service. In the New Testament, the word is used to describe Zechariah’s priestly duty (Lk 1:23), the work of evangelization that the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to (Acts 13:2), Paul’s priestly service of evangelizing the Gentiles (Rom 15:16), the work of collecting alms for poor churches (2 Cor 9:12), the building up of the faith of the Philippians which Paul sacrifices himself for (Phil 2:17), and the assistance which Epaphroditus renders Paul (Phil 2:25, 30). In the Christian tradition, liturgy denotes *the official worship of the Church*, from which evangelization and deeds of charity flow. In this way, it is not only priestly, but prophetic and kingly, as well.

In short, liturgy is worship. It is the official worship of the Church. It is the worship which the “whole Christ,” Head and members, offers lovingly to the Father in the Holy Spirit. The latest Church council, Vatican II, describes it as the “exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.”

It is important to understand that liturgy is not primarily the worship we offer God. It is rather the worship that Christ offers the Father, and we are joined to that worship through being members of His Body, the Church, through Baptism. *It is Jesus drawing us into His worship.* In the liturgy, Jesus offers up His great act. Which act? The greatest act of love that the world has ever known: the act by which He laid down His life on the Cross in perfect love of the Father and perfect love of us. In the Catholic tradition, we speak of the whole Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus as one great act, the *Paschal Mystery*. This great “act” is not only at the heart of history: it is at the heart of the Church’s worship. The *Paschal Mystery*, then, is the great act of love that Christ in His risen humanity offers unceasingly to the Father, involving His Church. As Jesus draws us into His worship, then, our worship is made and perfected through Him, and God heals, blesses, and sanctifies us through Him. So, in the liturgy, at the same time, God is glorified, and we are sanctified.

In the gift of the Eucharist, and with the command, “Do this in memory of me” from the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:24-25; Lk 22:19), Jesus has entrusted the Church with this great act of love, the Paschal Mystery. He has thereby given the Church the means of adequately worshipping the Father through Him in every age. In this way Jesus draws Christians of every age into His great act of love. And because this act is celebrated and offered in the liturgy, the liturgy is called the “source and summit of the Christian life.” The Christian life flows from the Paschal Mystery, and all Christian acts are ordered to the Paschal Mystery, which is celebrated and offered in the liturgy.

Christians are called to glorify God through Christ in everything they do and, so, live lives of worship. However, there are certain acts of the Church which make the Paschal Mystery present in an “official” and privileged way. These are the “instances of liturgy,” or “instances” of the official worship of the Church. These “instances of liturgy” includes the celebration of each of the seven *Sacraments*. They also include the *Liturgy of the Hours*, which priests and religious, as well as some lay people, pray at different times of each day. They also include various kinds of *Blessings*.

Liturgy, then, is an act. It is an act of worship. It is the act of Christ offering up His Paschal Mystery to the Father in a way that involves the participation of the Church. In the Mass, we refer to this act as a *Sacrifice*, and it is for this reason that the notion of sacrifice is at the heart of the concept of liturgy. In order to better understand liturgy and the notion of sacrifice, it is helpful to understand how the Passion of Christ is a sacrifice. And in order to understand how Christ’s Passion is a sacrifice, it will be helpful to consider the background of ancient pagan and Jewish sacrifice.

Why did ancient cultures practice sacrifice?

The practice of sacrifice was universal in the ancient world and, yet, is almost entirely absent from the modern world. It is not surprising, then, that the idea and practice of sacrifice is so foreign to us and our sensibilities. Many people today mistakenly think that ancient sacrifice was all about doing violence to an animal. The essence of ancient sacrifice is not violence though. The essence of ancient sacrifice is, rather, *offering*—the offering of something good to a god. Because ancient gods were often thought of as above human beings, yes, but also very human-like, ancient peoples thought that the gods would like the same things that humans like, above all a good meal! In both ancient and modern times, we honor important guests by giving them a good meal. In the case of the gods, however, there is need to transfer the meal to their realm. This was done by fire. Hence, ancient sacrifice was mostly about offering edible things (the best of one’s domestic animals or grains) to the gods, and passing these things over to the gods by means of smoke generated by fire on an altar. So, the violence done to an animal was not the goal of sacrifice, just as the violence used in hunting and processing an animal is not the goal of hunting. Instead, whatever destruction is involved in hunting is simply a means to feeding people. Likewise, ancient sacrifice was all about presenting something good to a god, something the god would like, for the sake of swaying the god to bless you in some way or to abate his or her anger. Any violence done was only the means and preparation for offering something pleasing to the god, not the goal.

For important causes and pleadings, bigger and more valuable animals were sacrificed. Following this logic, some ancient cultures resorted to human sacrifice. When things got desperate, some people thought that perhaps offering up the most valuable thing of all—human life—would be pleasing to this or that god. So, if offering up many oxen didn't obtain the desired results, they sometimes tried offering up something yet more valuable, human beings. Perverse, yes, but their reasoning often followed these lines.

Why did the Jews practice sacrifice?

Because the Israelites and Jews believed in one all-powerful God who did not have human needs and desires like the gods of other cultures were thought to have, it is legitimate to ask why they practiced sacrifice at all. After all, God neither needs nor desires food. He needs nothing. This is affirmed very clearly in Scripture (see Ps 50). At the same time, the Pentateuch portrays the whole system of sacrifice as divinely instituted. Why would God ask for sacrifice, then, since He does not need it, and the Israelites know this?

The answer is that it is for our good, not God's good. The sacrifices were meant to function as *exterior signs of interior acts of worship*. That is, the various sacrifices of the Old Testament provided the people with a physical and tangible way to express their devotion to God. Because we are body and soul, it is fitting that we human beings express our interior worship of God in an outward and physical manner. Jewish sacrifice was a means of doing this. Thus, the *Whole-Burnt Offering*, where the whole animal or all the grains were offered up, was a way of expressing our total love for God. *Communion Sacrifices*, where part of the animal was offered and part eaten, expressed being in relationship with God. *Sin Offerings* were a means of expressing sorrow for sin, and of making atonement and obtaining forgiveness. *Thank-Offerings*, *Votive Offerings*, and *Free-Will Offerings*, were a means of expressing one's free, non-obligated thanksgiving to God for favors received. And so forth. In this way, the sacrifices were pedagogical and formative for the people of God. They taught the people how to relate to God. They were also a means of expressing worship to God.

At the same time, we know that an exterior act can be done without the heart being involved, or without a person having true repentance, embracing conversion, or having sincerity of heart. In such cases, the sacrifices became empty. The prophets would decry such empty and presumptuous devotion. They reminded the people that what God really wanted was conversion of heart and righteousness, not the blood of goats and calves (Ps 40:6; Ps 50; Is 1:10-17; Jer 7; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). So, while it is fitting that we outwardly express our interior worship to God, the sacrifices do no good and become empty if not accompanied by conversion of the heart and righteous living.

In light of these dynamics of sacrifice, how can Christ's Passion be a sacrifice?

St. Augustine once articulated that there are four essential parts of sacrifice:

1. The *God* to whom the sacrifice is offered
2. The *People* for whom the sacrifice is offered
3. The *Priest* who offers the sacrifice to God for the people
4. The *Victim* (the sacrifice itself) offered upon an altar

When we look at the Cross of Christ, at first glance it looks nothing like a traditional sacrifice. There are Jewish priests present when Jesus is crucified, but in their mind they are putting a blasphemer to death, not offering sacrifice. There are people there, but many of them are in favor of Christ's crucifixion. Further, those who are not supportive do not see the Crucifixion as a sacrifice, but as a great travesty. God is present, but Jesus feels the forsakenness of sin in His sufferings, and cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" even though He is without sin and does not doubt His Father's presence. There is also no traditional altar, or animal or grain sacrifice being burned upon it. Thus, the scene of the Passion, on the surface level, in no way looks like a sacrifice.

The Last Supper, however, is the key to understanding how the Passion of Christ on the Cross is a sacrifice. At the Last Supper, Jesus takes bread and wine and declares them to be His Body and Blood. Since the context is a Passover meal, all is *offered to God* in prayer. *What is offered* (the *Victim* or the *Sacrifice* itself) is His Body and Blood, which is Himself. *Who offers* it (the *Priest*) is seen to be Jesus Himself. This means that Jesus is both the priest and the victim. It is also not only offered *to God*, but *for the people* as well: Jesus says that what He offers is "for many" and "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). And He is clearly identifying the transformed bread and wine with what will be given up and poured out the next day on the Cross. In other words, Good Friday is contained in Holy Thursday. The act of the Passion is contained in the Eucharist. Further, since Jesus is fully God and fully man, He is *one with the God* to whom the sacrifice is being offered, and *one with the people* for whom the sacrifice is being offered. Hence, at the Last Supper, Jesus is seen to embody all four essential aspects of sacrifice. He is the *Priest*, the *Victim*, and is *one with God and the people* in the sacrifice. The Last Supper, then, helps us to realize how Good Friday is a sacrifice.

The Passion of Jesus is the sacrifice that fulfills all ancient sacrifices. It fulfills the *Whole-Burnt Offerings*, since Jesus gives Himself totally. It is a *Communion Sacrifice*, since Jesus gives us Himself (the *Victim*) to partake of in the Eucharist. It fulfills the *Sin-Offering*, since on the Cross Jesus bears the sins of the world and says that the Eucharist is "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). It also fulfills the *Thank-Offerings*, *Votive Offerings*, and *Free-Will Offerings*, since Jesus "gave thanks" at the Last Supper and offers Himself to the Father freely and voluntarily. The very word "Eucharist" also means "thanksgiving." In a sense, Christ's Sacrifice also fulfills and corrects *human sacrifice*. It is interesting that the greatest and most perfect sacrifice in history did not involve an animal or grains, but rather a human being. The truth behind human sacrifice is that human beings are valuable, and that ultimately God wants *us*, not animals or grains. Where

human sacrifice went wrong is in the manner of offering. God does not want our death, or for us to be offered as food. He rather wants us to be given and “offered” to Him in love and in the manner of our life. Further, all animal and grain sacrifices, as we have seen, were meant to symbolize and express our interior worship, that is, the offering of ourselves to God. They were all supposed to be a means of us giving ourselves to God in love. In the Passion of Christ, Jesus gives Himself completely to God in love, faithful even unto death. The way Jesus was put to death was unjust. However, in this injustice, Jesus willingly offers Himself in love to God and for us and for our salvation.

It is also for these reasons that the Passion of Christ is the Sacrifice that puts an end to all other sacrifices, which were provisional and incomplete. This Sacrifice is what all other sacrifices were trying to achieve but fell short of. The Passion of Christ is true worship. It is true worship, because it expresses total love, faithful unto death. When we give ourselves to God, our self-gift falls short, because of our sins. But the self-giving of Christ to the Father is pure and perfect love without sin. It is fully pleasing to the Father, because it is the perfect expression of total self-giving love without selfishness and sin. Because of Jesus’ perfect love and worship, then, we can now offer up in our own way—in the Mass, through the priest, and in our lives—this perfect act of Jesus, the *Paschal Mystery*. And we seek to let this sacrifice, this act of perfect love, perfect our worship and purify our hearts and lives. This is the Sacrifice that purifies our worship, and teaches us to offer ourselves in love to God, in union with Jesus and for the good of others. It is also the act that teaches us how to live, since the Church calls us to *mirror in life what we contemplate in worship*. The perfect and total love that is at the heart of the Passion, and at the heart of all Christ’s deeds and words, is supposed to be at the heart of everything we say and do as well. In this way, through the liturgy, Christ draws us into His perfect and total love, helping us to love like He loves. It is a love that heals and sanctifies us, even as it glorifies God. So, in the liturgy, and in life by extension, we are called to offer ourselves to God in union with the offering of Jesus. In this way, we celebrate, receive, and seek to imitate and live out the perfect love that we see and experience in the Paschal Mystery. In every Mass, the Paschal Mystery becomes present on our altars in the Eucharist. We are then called to contemplate this great act of love, to unite ourselves with it, to be transformed by it, and to mirror it in our every day lives.

How is each Mass a sacrifice, then?

At each Mass, the same sacrifice is celebrated and offered over and over again. It is not that Jesus is sacrificed over and over again. He only offered Himself *once* upon the Cross. However, in the Mass, the one sacrifice of the *Paschal Mystery* is made present, offered, and applied to people in various times and places. It is a re-presentation of the one offering which was made at the Last Supper and which contains the whole Paschal Mystery. It is the worship of Jesus entrusted to the Church and celebrated by Her throughout history as the center of Her worship and life.

All the “instances of liturgy,” tap into and draw upon the inexhaustible font of grace that is the Paschal Mystery. The Mass, above all, contains and celebrates it. All other instances of liturgy (the other Sacraments, Liturgy of the Hours, and Blessings) are united to, and directed to, the celebration of the Paschal Mystery in the Mass.

As we can see, the concept of liturgy is rich and deep. It can be difficult to understand at first. With time and greater understanding, however, its power opens up to us and attracts us into its inner riches.

What is the “Liturgical Year”?

Over the course of a year, the Church unfolds and celebrates the mysteries of the life of Christ. She also celebrates feasts of Mary and other saints as part of the mystery of Christ, since they belong to Christ’s Body, the Church. We call this organized year of celebration the *Liturgical Year*.

There are two main feasts of the liturgical year: *Christmas* (when we celebrate the birth of Christ into our world) and *Easter* (when we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, having defeated the evils of sin, suffering, and death). And because these feasts are so significant, we celebrate them, not for one day only, but for eight days solemnly. Hence, we have the *Octave of Christmas*, and the *Octave of Easter*. Even beyond that, we have a *Christmas Season* that extends up until the Baptism of the Lord. Likewise, we have a whole *Easter Season* that extends beyond the Octave all the way to the feast of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. *White* is the liturgical color for the Christmas and Easter seasons. *Gold* can be used as well but is usually reserved for the greatest feasts.

Further, because the two feasts of Christmas and Easter are so important, we have whole “seasons” to *prepare* for them. *Advent* is the four-week season leading up to Christmas. *Lent* is the 40-day season that leads up to Holy Week and Easter. Advent begins the Liturgical Year. *Purple*, or *Violet*, is the color for the preparation seasons of Advent and Lent. On one Sunday just past the halfway point in both Advent and Lent, the color *Rose* is worn. This expresses the joy of anticipation as we near the great feasts of Christmas and Easter.

Between the end of the Christmas Season and the beginning of Lent (in the early Spring), and from after Pentecost (late Spring) until the next Advent (December), we have the “Time of the Year,” or “Ordinary Time.” During this time, we celebrate the public life of Jesus. The color *Green* is used for this time. There are 34 weeks designated for Ordinary Time. Toward the end of the liturgical year, we meditate on the “last things,” and on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, before the next Advent begins, we celebrate the *Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe*. This feast crowns the whole liturgical year. Thus, the liturgical year with these seasons can be outlined in this way:

- Advent → Christmas
- Ordinary Time
- Lent → Holy Week & Easter
- Ordinary Time

With this ancient format, the Church celebrates the early life of Jesus at Christmas, the public life of Jesus during ordinary time, and the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus, as well as the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost, in the Easter Season. She also reminds and prepares us for the second coming of Christ at the end of Ordinary Time (at the end of the liturgical year).

Why is Sunday so important and central in Christian worship?

Sunday is the constant throughout the liturgical year. Sunday is the day on which Christ rose from the dead. Sunday Mass is the main liturgy at which all Christians are expected to gather, following Our Lord's injunction, "Do this in memory of me" (1 Cor 11:24-25). It also fulfills the third of the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament, which is "You shall keep holy the Sabbath day" (Ex 20:8; Dt 5:12). For Christians, the Sabbath day (traditionally Saturday) has been transferred to Sunday because of Christ's Resurrection. Sunday then is the new "Lord's day" (Rev 1:10). It is the "first day of the week" (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2, 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2), the "day" on which the universe was created as it were, the day on which Christ recreated the earth through His Resurrection, and the day that the Holy Spirit came upon the Church at Pentecost. For these reasons, attendance at Sunday Mass is a serious obligation for Catholics, unless someone is sick or has some other serious reason for not coming. But it should be thought of more as a joy, blessing, and privilege than simply an obligation and duty.

What is "Holy Week" and the "Triduum"?

Holy Week is the holiest week of the year. It begins a week before Easter on "Passion Sunday," or "Palm Sunday," which celebrates Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Mass on this Sunday begins with the reading of the account of Jesus' triumphal procession, the blessing of palms, and a procession into the church. The whole Passion account from Matthew, Mark, or Luke is read, according to whether the year is Year A, B, or C. Thursday of this week is called "Holy Thursday," and one evening Mass is celebrated which commemorates the Last Supper, with the washing of the feet, and the gift of the Eucharist and priesthood. At the end of Mass, there is a procession with the Eucharist, and veneration into the night. Earlier in the day, and sometimes earlier in the week, the *Chrism Mass* is celebrated in Cathedrals around the world. Priests gather with their bishop for this celebration. They renew the commitment of their priesthood and obtain *Holy Oils* for the Church's Sacraments. Friday is called "Good Friday," and it celebrates the Passion of Christ on the Cross. It is the one full day of the year when no Mass is celebrated. We enter into the barrenness of the Cross. In the liturgical celebration of *The Passion of the Lord*, there is a liturgy of the Word, followed by a veneration of the Cross, followed by the reception

of Holy Communion. The Hosts received, however, are consecrated from the day before. Saturday of Holy Week is called “Holy Saturday,” and no Mass is celebrated until the evening. *Holy Saturday* is a day of quiet when the Lord rests in death on the day of rest, the Sabbath. On that evening, the greatest and longest feast of the year is celebrated, the *Easter Vigil*. The Easter Vigil has four parts: the *Service of Light*, the *Liturgy of the Word*, the *Baptismal Liturgy*, and the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*. It usually begins outdoors, where a fire is prepared and blessed, from which a new Easter Candle, or *Paschal Candle*, is lit. All process into the Church following the Paschal Candle, which is a symbol of the risen Christ. After the ancient hymn, the *Exultet*, is sung, there are numerous readings from the Old Testament. Then, the Gloria is sung, a passage from Romans read, the Gospel proclaimed, and a homily given. After that, there is a baptismal liturgy when those who have been in RCIA officially enter the Church and receive her Sacraments. After everyone renews their baptismal vows, the Mass proceeds as normal with the Eucharistic Prayer and Holy Communion. A special, sung *Alleluia* is added to the dismissal.

The three great feasts of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, including the Easter Vigil, is called the *Sacred Triduum* (Sacred Three Days). Although Catholics are required to attend an Easter Mass, no one is required to attend the Triduum services. Rather, all are encouraged to come of their own volition, as they are able. The Triduum is at the heart of Holy Week, the Liturgical Year, the Church, and the Christian life.

What are “feast days”?

Feast days are special days that celebrate some aspect of the life of Jesus, or which celebrate Mary and the saints. Some are “moveable,” meaning that they fall on different dates each year, like Ash Wednesday, Easter, the Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Most are on the same date every year. The following are some significant feast days assigned to a certain date:

January 1	Mary, the Holy Mother of God
March 19	St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary
March 25	Annunciation of the Lord
May 31	Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
August 6	Transfiguration of the Lord
August 15	Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
September 14	Exaltation of the Holy Cross
December 8	Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
December 25	Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Not all feast days are of equal importance. It is for this reason that there are three general rankings of feasts: *Solemnities*, *Feasts*, and *Memorials*. They are distinguished liturgically in the following ways, with regard to the Mass:

- **Solemnities:** Solemnities are the highest rank. Christmas, Easter, all Sundays, and the highest feast days celebrating Jesus, Mary, and certain Saints are ranked as solemnities. On solemnities, there are two readings which precede the Gospel at Mass. The *Gloria* and the *Creed* are also sung or recited. Six candles are fittingly used on or around the altar.
- **Feasts:** Feasts are the next highest rank. The Presentation, Transfiguration, feasts of the Apostles, and some other feasts are celebrated properly as “Feasts.” Usually on a Feast there is only one reading before the Gospel. The *Gloria* is sung or recited, but not the *Creed*. When Feasts are occasionally celebrated on Sundays, they are celebrated in the manner of a Solemnity. Four candles are fittingly used at the altar when celebrated on days other than Sunday.
- **Memorials:** Most saints’ days are celebrated as a Memorial. Neither the *Gloria* nor the *Creed* are sung or recited. There are two types of Memorials, *Obligatory* and *Optional*. The Memorial of St. Martha on July 29 is an example of an Obligatory Memorial. Whereas the Memorial of St. Patrick is on March 17 and is Optional. Obligatory means that a priest must celebrate the daily Mass on that day in honor of that saint, whereas he is not required if it is an Optional Memorial. Just two candles are used at the altar for memorials.

Whenever two feasts fall on the same day, the greater feast trumps the lesser.

The color *red* is used for Good Friday, Pentecost, and for feasts of martyrs. *White* is used for all other saints. *Violet*, *white*, or *black* can be used for funerals and for All Souls.

What are “holy days of obligation”?

Throughout the world, there are certain solemnities that fall outside of Sunday on which Catholics are obligated to attend Mass. In the United States, there are six:

January 1	Mary, the Holy Mother of God
(date varies)	Ascension Thursday (<i>when it hasn’t been transferred to Sunday</i>)
August 15	Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
November 1	All Saints
December 8	Immaculate Conception
December 25	Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Churches offer various times for Masses on these days, to make it convenient for people to go to Mass, given their work schedules. Evening Masses are often offered, including a Vigil Mass (the evening before, when the Solemnity actually begins), and often on the evening of the Solemnity as well.

Is Mass celebrated every day?

Yes, Mass is celebrated every day of the year except on Good Friday and Holy Saturday (before the Easter Vigil). Usually daily Masses are about thirty minutes in length. No Catholics are obliged to go to daily Mass. However, many people like to go and find great blessings in going. They are able to hear much of the Scriptures read, along with regular homilies, and are able to receive the Holy Eucharist every day. Many retired and unemployed people go to daily Mass, as well as many workers either before or after work, or on their lunch hour.

When do Catholics fast?

Fasting individually is a praiseworthy practice which can help us discipline ourselves, be more detached from earthly food and comforts, draw close to God, and open ourselves up to the needs of others. However, the Church calls us all to fast together at certain times. The Church calls us to fast from food for at least one hour before receiving Holy Communion, in normal circumstances, in order to better appreciate and prepare for the Eucharist. She also calls us to either fast from meat or make some other sacrifice every Friday of the year. On the Fridays of Lent, she requires us to give up meat completely. Fish is allowed. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, she requires us to abstain completely from meat and to limit ourselves to eating one full meal during the day, allowing two other snacks if needed for strength. This is something we all do together in order to honor the Passion of Christ. It should be seen as a blessing, not a burden. Jesus calls us to be joyful and unnoticed in our fasting (Mt 6:16-18).

What is the Liturgy of Hours?

In short, the *Liturgy of the Hours* involves praying the psalms at different times of the day, along with other prayers. The Church has organized a way of praying the psalms and other prayers throughout each day and throughout the liturgical year. Priests and religious are obliged to pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*. For most lay people, it is completely optional and not expected. The *Liturgy of the Hours* traditionally would have been prayed every three hours throughout the day. This created eight times when prayer was offered throughout the day. In our day, however, there are five main periods of prayer for diocesan priests and many active religious:

- Office of Readings (traditionally prayed at midnight but now prayed at any time)
- Morning Prayer (usually prayed between 6-9am)
- Daytime Prayer (usually prayed between 9am and 3pm)
- Evening Prayer (usually prayed between 5-7pm)
- Night Prayer (prayed before going to bed)

Each period of prayer takes about 5-20 minutes—depending on length, on whether it is sung or recited, and on how quickly or slowly it is prayed.

What are Blessings and Sacramentals?

We are called to use everything for the glory of God. Therefore, the Church provides blessings for persons, animals, plants, buildings, vehicles of transportation, tools, devotional items (such as rosaries or sacred images), water, and other items. There is an official *Book of Blessings* which the Church uses for all of these things, with readings from Scripture and prayers that accompany the blessing. Most blessings are reserved for priests and deacons to give, in virtue of their ordination. Some blessings are reserved to the Pope, to bishops, or to priests of particular religious communities. Lay people can give certain blessings. For example, we are all encouraged to “bless ourselves” with *Holy Water* as a reminder of our Baptism, and parents are encouraged to “bless” their children by tracing the *Sign of the Cross* on their forehead when their children go out, or before tucking them in to bed. Blessings are all about Christ blessing both us and the things we use in our daily lives, so that everything we do can be sanctified and better ordered to the glory of God.

At churches, Holy Water is regularly available to the faithful. They are encouraged not only to bless themselves with Holy Water as they enter and exit the church as a reminder of their baptism, but also to fill up a container of Holy Water to bring home with them. The faithful can have a little font or bowl of Holy Water in their homes and apartments, so that they can bless themselves there.

It is also recommended that the faithful ask to have their house or apartment blessed. You can make an appointment with the priest. It is fitting to invite family members and friends. It takes about ten minutes. After beginning in a central room and asking God’s blessing upon all who live in the dwelling, the residents guide the priest to all the rooms. The priest sprinkles the rooms with Holy Water. All come back to the central room and end with prayer and song.

You are also encouraged to seek blessings for new rosaries, sacred images, and other devotional items. A priest can usually do this quickly and easily after Mass.

Sacramentals include blessings and blessed things. They can be seen as an extension of the Sacraments and as a way of making one’s daily life holy. When used rightly, they are ordered back to the Liturgy and Sacraments as well. One should not use sacred and blessed items in a superstitious way, but as a means of growing in one’s faith and directing everything to God’s glory.

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“The priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven.” —Lev 4:20

“Sacrifice and offering you do not desire; but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; in the roll of the book it is written of me; I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”

—Ps 40:6-8

Psalm 50 (*the acceptable sacrifice*)

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” —Is 1:11, 16-17

“For by a single offering He (Jesus) has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

—Heb 10:14

“Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into Heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer Himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” —Heb 9:23-26

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron and his sons, Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you: the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the sons of Israel, and I will bless them.’”

—Num 6:22-27

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What is Liturgy, and what are the different “instances of Liturgy”?*
2. *How are we called to participate in the Liturgy?*
3. *How do we live the Liturgy in our daily lives?*