

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 12: The Concluding Rites

How do we know when the Communion Rite is over? Some people leave the church after they receive Communion; is this acceptable practice? To close our series of reflections on the Mass, let's investigate the ending of the Communion Rite and the Concluding Rites.

As we move forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and return to our seats, a period of calm prayer follows. We may offer a song of thanksgiving and praise. Sometimes we rest in the Lord's Presence and simply enjoy the silence. The Communion Rite ends when the celebrant offers the "Prayer after Communion" in which the celebrant invites us to recall that the Lord is with us and we respond. This grace-filled ending expresses our gratitude for the great gift we have just received. It offers our hope that we will go out into our daily lives and continue to build the Kingdom of God.

The time between the Prayer after Communion and the Rite of Dismissal is the proper time for making very brief announcements, to the community. In the past, announcements often occurred immediately before or after the homily and this practice interrupted the flow of the Eucharist. Following the liturgical reform in the late 1960's, announcements were placed in the Concluding Rites. Many parishes have since discovered that their weekly bulletins, emails, websites or message boards communicate best. Indeed, it is preferable not to have announcements except in special circumstances or special need.

During this time, the presider may choose to comment on the sacred rites we have just experienced. We may hear brief thoughts about the value of a Confirmation retreat or suggestions about choosing suitable godparents. Or we might listen to a brief appeal for refugee resettlement or special aid to a diocese that has been hit by a massive flood. As the parish family, we receive this information and we allow our hearts to be moved by appeals to assist our brothers and sisters in Christ.

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In the Final Blessing, the priest speaks of the Lord's presence to the community. He uses a prayerful gesture with his arms extended. We respond back, "*And with your spirit.*" The priest makes the sign of the cross and says, "*May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*" We respond, "*Amen.*"

On some occasions the Mass may end with a solemn blessing, which is a bit more formal. The deacon, if there is one, asks us to bow our heads and pray for God's blessing. The priest then offers a prayer that consists of three parts. As he prays, his arms are extended and he encompasses all the People of God. The deacon again speaks and instructs us to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. The original Latin, *Ite, missa est* actually instructed us: "*Go; your mission begins.*" The deacon will say; "*Go forth; the Mass is ended.*" This is the absolute conclusion of the Mass. As God gives us precious gifts, there is new work for us to do. We prepare to leave with gratitude for all that has been given to us. We leave now to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. We respond with our grateful hearts: "*Thanks be to God.*" We watch the priest go through the same beautiful ritual that began the Mass. He kisses the altar, a symbol of Christ, and we sing a final hymn or listen to an instrumental selection.

In our original question, we wondered whether it would be acceptable to leave after the Communion Rite. We have learned that the Concluding Rites assist us to offer our humble thanksgiving and gratitude to the Lord who has invited us to this banquet and given us gifts to take with us. Who among us could leave without accepting these precious gifts?