

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 2: The Introductory Rites, Part I



The preparation that we began before Mass continues as we gather as the Church. The Introductory Rites help us to discover a unity that is already ours, but still waiting to be realized by our participation. The Entrance Procession, Veneration of the Altar, the Greeting, the Penitential Rite, the Kyrie, the Gloria, and the Collect - all serve to prepare us for celebration. They help to establish a sense of unity, so that we might hear the Word of God and celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist joyfully.

One of the signs of that unity is our common bodily posture - when Mass begins we all stand. Standing from the beginning of the Entrance Song through the Collect signifies our sense of preparation for the whole liturgy. But standing is not the only symbolic gesture we experience at the beginning of Mass. There is movement as well, starting with the Entrance Procession. The procession serves more than a functional purpose of getting the priest and other ministers to their proper place in the sanctuary. It serves a symbolic purpose as well, for it reminds us that we are the People of God, a pilgrim people, on a journey to the Kingdom, with this Mass being an important part of that journey.

Because this journey is a joyful one, we add our voices to the Entrance Song, even though we may protest that we cannot sing. The Entrance Song is more than just “walking music;” it opens the celebration and introduces us to the themes of the liturgy. It reminds us that liturgy is a common action - a communal act of prayer, not a private act - that calls us to move beyond the limits of our own world and enter something larger.

A further sign of our preparedness occurs when the priest and other ministers reach the altar. Now we witness a sign that unites us not only to each other, but to our ancient past – the Veneration of the Altar. Arriving

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at the table of the Lord, the priest and deacon venerate the altar with a reverent kiss, for it is on this table that ordinary bread and wine will become the Body and Blood of Christ. In fact, the altar represents Christ, who is the priest, the victim, and the sacrifice.

The symbolism of being one people of God continues as we join with the priest in making the sign of the cross. This symbolic gesture, dating from at least the second century, signifies the presence of the Lord and is a traditional prelude to prayer. Romano Guardini, a priest and author wrote: “It is the holiest of all signs. When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. Instead of a small cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us at once.”

The greeting by the celebrant, “The Lord be with you,” which follows the sign of the cross, is not intended as a friendly “good morning.” Rather it is more like a wish that those assembled will experience the presence and power of the Lord in the community they have formed. Our response, “And With Your Spirit,” is more than a simple expression of good will; it is a reminder that our celebrant has received the Spirit of God in ordination and is, therefore, a special “servant of Christ” (1st Corinthians 4:1). The greeting announces that the Lord is here in this place. It indicates that what we do here is different from our day-to-day activity. It affirms that we have gathered in the name of Christ to offer praise and thanksgiving as his body. The Greeting and our response express “the mystery of the Church gathered together.”