The Mass is a miracle that happens every day, many times a day, probably quite near your home. When we go to Mass, we enter heaven. We see the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross made present right there on the altar, and we become one body with Christ in Holy Communion.

When we pray at Mass, we address all the saints and angels because they’re with us. Our Mass on earth is the way we join in the eternal liturgy of heaven, where all the saints joyfully worship God.

The word “Mass” comes from the last words of the Latin dismissal, “Ite, missa est” — that is, “The congregation has been sent forth.” Eastern Catholics also call the Mass the Divine Liturgy, “liturgy” being a Greek word for “public service.”

**Parts of the Mass**

Masses are celebrated in different languages, according to different approved rituals, and with a variety of musical settings (or no music at all). But every Mass is fundamentally the same, and each one follows the same general outline.

The Mass is divided into two main parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

There is also a group of brief Introductory Rites before the Liturgy of the Word, and a group of brief Concluding Rites after the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

That makes four parts altogether.

Here’s how a typical Mass goes:

**Introductory Rites.** These are the rituals that prepare us for the Mass by putting us in the right frame of mind and heart.

- **Greeting:** The priest greets the assembly in the name of the Trinity, and we return his greeting. When he says, “The Lord be with you,” we say, “And with your spirit.” to acknowledge that the priest acts on behalf of God, and that the Mass is primarily the work of God and not any human being.
- **Penitential Act:** With some standard prayers, we confess in front of the whole Church that we have sinned, and we ask for God’s mercy. Sometimes, instead of the Penitential Act, we have a blessing with holy water, which reminds us of our baptism, the sacrament that removes both original and actual sin.
- **Kyrie Eleison:** An ancient hymn in which we ask for God’s mercy. “Kyrie” is Greek for “O Lord,” and often we sing or speak these words in Greek, just as the very early Christians did.
- **Glória:** A hymn of praise, in which we sing the words the angels sang when they announced the birth of Christ. (It is not sung during Advent or Lent.)
- **Collect (Opening Prayer):** A short prayer that changes for each Mass.

**Liturgy of the Word.** This is when we hear the Word of God proclaimed in its natural and supernatural environment, the Church.

- **First Reading:** A reading from Scripture, usually (but not always) from the Old Testament.
- **Psalm:** One of the Psalms from the Bible, usually sung or said responsively.
- **Second Reading:** Another reading from Scripture, usually from the letters of Paul or one of the other New Testament writers.

There is always a second reading on Sundays and major feasts, but not on other days of the week.

- **Alleluia:** A short hymn of praise in preparation for hearing the Gospel. During Lent, the “alleluia” is replaced with another Gospel acclamation more appropriate to a season of repentance.

- **Gospel:** A reading from one of the four Gospels. This is the most important reading, since it tells of the words or deeds of Christ himself. That’s why it’s surrounded with rituals that make us aware of its importance: The Book of the Gospels is carried in solemn procession to begin the Mass; on some occasions, the priest will incense the Book as well. We stand to listen to the Gospel, and we trace the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, lips, and hearts as we ask for openness and receptivity to the Word that we hear proclaimed.

- **Homily:** The priest helps us understand the Scripture readings we have just heard, showing us how they apply to our own lives today.

- **Profession of Faith (Creed):** We recite an ancient summary of our beliefs, declaring to the whole assembly that we mean to live by those beliefs.

- **Prayer of the Faithful:** A long prayer in which we ask God’s help for ourselves and all those who need it.

**Liturgy of the Eucharist.** This is the heart of the Mass, in which we meet Christ face-to-face.

- **Offertory:** We present the gifts of bread and wine for the sacrifice. We also bring forward our own gifts. In this way, all our work and life is united with the sacrifice of Christ.

- **Eucharistic Prayer:** As this prayer is said, the bread and wine we offer are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. There are several forms of the Eucharistic Prayer, but they all tell the story of the Last Supper, and they all include the words of Christ: “This is my Body” and “This is my Blood.” When the priest speaks those words, the bread and wine actually become Christ’s Body and Blood. The Eucharistic Prayer also includes Sanctus, or “Holy, Holy, Holy,” in which we join the hymn of the seraphim who worship in the court of the Lord (see Isaiah 6:3).

- **Communion Rite,** which includes several parts:
  - **Lord’s Prayer:** We pray aloud the prayer that Jesus taught us, asking for “our daily bread.”
  - **Sign of Peace:** We reconcile ourselves to our neighbors before we come to the altar, as Christ taught us (see Matthew 5:23-24).
  - **Ecce Agnus Dei** and the Breaking of the Bread: We are invited to the “supper of the Lamb.”
  - **Holy Communion:** We receive the Body and Blood of Christ.
  - **Prayer after Communion:** The priest leads us in this prayer, also different for each Mass.

**Concluding Rites.** These are very short, because the climax of the Mass — Holy Communion — has already happened.
What changes?

We believe that a complete change takes place in the elements offered to God in the Mass. What were bread and wine become Jesus’ Body and Blood. Theologians call this change transsubstitution — a change in the very substance. That is why Catholics usually prefer not to refer to the consecrated gifts as “bread” and “wine.” Sometimes they will refer to the “host” (using an ancient sacrificial term) for the species of bread and “the Precious Blood” to refer to the contents of the chalice. But in either species, Christ is entirely and truly present.

Communion under one or both forms?

In some Masses, you’ll see the congregation receiving Communion under the species of both bread and wine. In others, they receive only the host. Is receiving both better?

No. Christ is really and completely present in both elements. Whether both elements are offered or just the host is a decision the bishops make on practical grounds, but either way we receive the fullness of Christ — Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

When do I have to go to Mass?

The Church requires us to go to Mass every Sunday.

We’re also required to go to Mass on certain holy days determined by the bishops, which because of that requirement are called holy days of obligation.

In many parishes, there is a Mass on Saturday evening (an “Anticipated Mass” or “Mass of Anticipation”) that will fulfill the Sunday obligation. But going to Mass on other days during the week — which is a very good idea — does not relieve us of the Sunday obligation. We still have to go on Sunday (or Saturday evening), even if we went on Thursday.

How often am I allowed to go to Mass?

As often as you like! Many people go to Mass every day, and there’s no reason not to go more often. There is a limit on Holy Communion, however: we may not take Holy Communion more than twice in one day.

Latin or English?

The official language of the “Latin Rite” Mass — the Mass used by Western Catholic churches — is Latin, but it’s usually translated from the original Latin into the language of the people. Up to the 1960s, even ordinary parish churches always celebrated the Mass in Latin.

Now, priests have the option of celebrating Mass in Latin or the common (vernacular) language. But whether it’s in Latin, English, Korean, Spanish, or any other language, the Mass is still the same Mass, and still just as much a miracle.

Scripture in the Mass

The better you know Scripture, the more you’ll recognize passages from Scripture in the Mass. Scripture itself belongs in the Mass: the Bible is fundamentally the list of books suited for reading in the liturgy, as we do in the Liturgy of the Word at every Mass (see Parts of the Mass). There are three or four extended Scripture readings in every Mass. Here are just a few of the other Scripture passages that form part of our Mass:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Matthew 28:19

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you: Romans 16:20

Glory to God in the highest: Luke 2:14

Holy, holy, holy: Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8

Our Father: Matthew 6:9-13

Lamb of God: John 1:29

Lord, I am not worthy: Luke 7:6-7

A Timeline of Mass History

In the Beginning: God creates humanity as priests, “by nature . . . religious beings” (CCC 44).


ca. 1050 B.C.: King David codifies Israelite liturgy.

ca. 1000 B.C.: King Solomon builds the Temple.

ca. 30 A.D.: Jesus Christ institutes the Mass at the Last Supper.

ca. 30 A.D.: First Christians devote themselves “to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

ca. 45 A.D.: St. Paul gives the Corinthians instructions for celebrating Mass in 1 Corinthians 10-11.

ca. 90's A.D.: St. Clement of Rome instructs the faraway Corinthian Church on conduct during Mass.

ca. 100: Instructions for celebrating Mass written down in the Didache.

ca. 112: Pliny the Younger, a pagan Roman governor, investigates Christianity, reports to Emperor Trajan on the Christians’ Eucharistic celebrations.

ca. 155: St. Justin Martyr describes, in detail, the Mass as celebrated in Rome. It is substantially the same form we use today.

ca. 385: St. Ambrose describes the liturgy as “Mass” (missa) — the earliest known writer to use the term that way.

ca. 600: Pope St. Gregory the Great standardizes the prayers of the Mass and promotes careful celebration of the rites.

1545-1563: Council of Trent addresses Protestant errors regarding the Mass.

1570: Tridentine Mass published; this will be the form of the Mass in the Latin Rite until the Mass of Pope Paul VI in 1969.


1969: Mass of Pope Paul VI (the “Novus Ordo”) published; this is the ordinary form of the Mass in the Latin Rite churches today.

1973: English translation of Mass prepared by ICEL.


2011: New English translation of Mass produced to more accurately reflect original Latin text.
The Mass in Scripture

Scripture tells the story of salvation history: God’s plan to save us from our own sin. The Mass is the climax of salvation history, in which the sacrifice of Christ on the cross happens on our altar. So Scripture is filled with references to the Mass, both in the Old Testament and in the New.

Old Testament: Foreshadowing the Mass

Throughout the Old Testament, we see signs of the Mass to come. The Mass didn’t just appear out of nowhere; it stands at the end of a long story we call Salvation History.

God’s earliest people offered sacrifices to the Lord, both to atone for their sins and to give God thanks for his salvation.

Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, brought Abraham bread and wine. New Testament writers see Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of Christ (see Hebrews 7).

The Passover sacrifice foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ, which saves us from death and bondage to sin.

The Law of Moses prescribed sacrificial rites for all Israel, again foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice of our Christian Mass.

The Psalms brought the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving to the fore—a sacrifice that Greek-speaking Jews would know as “the thanksgiving” (eucharistia, from which we get “Eucharist”).

The prophet Malachi foretold a time when a pure sacrifice would be offered to the Lord all over the earth (Malachi 1:11).

New Testament: The Apostles Celebrate the Mass

Jesus Christ told his disciples that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53-56).

At the Last Supper, Christ instituted the Mass when he said “This is my Body” and “This is my Blood” (see Matthew 26:26-28).


The Apostles celebrated the Mass with the very first Christians (Acts 2:42).

Before the Gospels were written down, St. Paul wrote an account of the Last Supper and gave the Corinthians instructions for celebrating the Mass (1 Corinthians 11:23-34).

The Letter to the Hebrews put the Mass in the context of salvation history.

Revelation showed how the Mass on earth is part of the worship that goes on constantly and forever in heaven.

The Vessels

We use special vessels for the Body and Blood of Christ. Like the vestments, most of them come from Roman times. The Church adopted the kinds of dishes that were used at a formal dinner, and adapted them to her own use.

The wine is offered in a chalice, which is like a large wine glass.

The bread is offered on a paten, a broad plate-like dish.

When the host is taken out of the church to the sick, it’s carried in a pyx, which is Greek for “box.”

Consecrated hosts are kept in a ciborium, which looks like a wide chalice with a lid.

After Mass, consecrated hosts are kept in the tabernacle, a beautifully decorated box that often sits on a smaller altar.

For Eucharistic adoration, hosts can be placed in a monstrance, a shrine that shows the host to the congregation.

The Building

A church building may be in almost any shape, from a cross to an octagon. But Catholic churches have the same fundamental parts.

The narthex or vestibule is where we enter the church.

The nave is the main part of the church. It’s called “nave” from the Latin word for a ship, as if it were a great ship in which we are all passengers.

The chancel or sanctuary is the part of the church where the altar and the tabernacle stand.

The altar is where the sacrifice of the Eucharist is offered. The congregation faces the altar, which is the focal point of the Mass. Often the altar is built over the relic of a saint. If there’s more than one altar in the church, we distinguish the main altar where Mass is offered as the High Altar.

The ambo, lectern, or pulpit (terms can be used interchangeably) is where all Scripture readings are done.

Located near the chancel is a sacristy, where the sacred vessels and vestments are kept and prepared for the Mass.

Flip to back to continue.
Mass Prayers and Responses
(Text in bold represents the wording that has changed in the Roman Missal.)

Greeting
Priest: The Lord be with you.
People: And with your spirit.

Dialogue at the Gospel
Deacon (or Priest): A reading from the holy Gospel according to N.
People: Glory to you, O Lord.

Penitential Act, Form A
(Confiteor)
I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done
and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault,
through my fault,
through my most grievous fault;
therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,
all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Penitential Act, Form B
Priest: Have mercy on us, O Lord.
People: For we have sinned against you.
Priest: Show us, O Lord, your mercy.
People: And grant us your salvation.

Nicene Creed
I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit
was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became
man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
his death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son
is adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy,
catholic and apostolic Church.
I confess one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.
Apostles’ Creed
I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by
the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again
from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of
God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.
I believe in
the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

Mystery of Faith
(Memorial Acclamation)
Priest: The mystery of faith.

People:
A — We proclaim your Death,
O Lord,
and profess your Resurrection
until you come again.
or B — When we eat this Bread
and drink this Cup,
we proclaim your Death,
O Lord,
until you come again.
or C — Save us, Savior of the world,
for by your Cross
and Resurrection,
you have set us free.

Sign of Peace
Priest: The peace of the Lord
be with you always.
People: And with your spirit.

Invitation to Prayer (Response)
May the Lord accept the sacrifice
at your hands
for the praise and glory of his name,
for our good
and the good of all his holy Church.

Preface Dialogue
Priest: The Lord be with you.
People: And with your spirit.

Priest: Lift up your hearts.
People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Priest: Let us give thanks
to the Lord our God.
People: It is right and just.

Holy, Holy, Holy
Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

Invitation to Communion
Priest: Behold the Lamb of God,
behold him who takes away
the sins of the world.
Blessed are those called
to the supper of the Lamb.
All: Lord, I am not worthy
that you should enter under my roof,
but only say the word
my soul shall be healed.

Concluding Rites
Priest: The Lord be with you.
People: And with your spirit.