

The Mass

Timeless and Changing

Q. Which parts of the Mass have remained unchanged over time? Why have some parts of the Mass changed?

A. The Second Vatican Council teaches that “the liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change.”¹ Because the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is “the heart and the summit of the Church’s life” (Catechism, no. 1407), changes in the rites of the Mass are more apparent to Catholics than are changes in other liturgical rites. Changes in the rites of the Mass also evoke the most questions and concerns.

Some changes are made at the whim of the celebrant or other ministers and are illicit. The Second Vatican Council forbids such actions: no person, “even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.”² Other changes, however, have been made under the direction of the Church’s Magisterium. Several such changes have taken place in the past four decades, especially between 1963 and 1969.

If changes in *one* rite of the Mass manifest the truth that parts of the Mass are changeable, then the simultaneous existence of *several* rites attests to this truth even more clearly. While the Roman Rite is used most frequently in the West, other rites have been in use in cer-

tain dioceses and religious orders. These rites include the Ambrosian Rite, the Mozarabic Rite, the Lyonnais Rite, the Bragan Rite, and the rites of the Dominicans, Carmelites, and Carthusians.³

A variety of rites also exists in the 20 Eastern Catholic Churches. Two Eastern Catholic Churches make use of the Alexandrian Rite; three, the Antiochian Rite; one, the Armenian Rite; 12, the Byzantine Rite; and two, the Chaldean Rite.⁴

The Mass of the Ages

The chart on the next two pages will help illustrate which parts of the Mass are timeless and which parts are changeable.

All four rites of the Mass have two main parts: what is called the Liturgy of the Word in the current Roman Rite, and what is called the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the current Roman Rite.⁵

In all four rites described (see chart, pp. 28-29), the presiding priest and people gather together before the readings from Sacred Scripture. All four rites call for readings from Sacred Scripture, and all call explicitly for at least one New Testament reading. All four rites make provision for a homily or sermon, though a homily is now mandatory in the Roman Rite only on Sundays and holy days of obligation.⁶ Likewise, all four rites call for an offertory rite; a Eucharistic



Altar in St. John's cave on the island of Patmos • photo by Beth Hart

Figure 1	Byzantine Divine Liturgy	Ordinary (Roman Rite, 1962 Missal)	Order of the Mass (Roman Rite, current Missal)
Consecration of the Body of Christ	Take, eat, THIS IS MY BODY, which is broken for you for the remission of sins.	Take and eat of this, all of you, FOR THIS IS MY BODY.	Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you.
Consecration of the Precious Blood of Christ	Drink of this all, THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.	THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL COVENANT: THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: WHICH IS BEING SHED FOR YOU AND FOR MANY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. As often as you shall do these actions, do this in memory of Me.	Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.

Figure 2 The Mass as described by St. Justin Martyr (c. 155) ²¹	Byzantine Divine Liturgy ²²	Ordinary (Roman Rite, 1962 Missal) ²³	Order of the Mass (Roman Rite, current Missal) ²⁴
			INTRODUCTORY RITES
“On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place.”	Proskomedia (preparation of the bread and wine)	Asperges	Entrance song
	MASS OF THE CATECHUMENS	MASS OF THE CATECHUMENS	Greeting
	Litany of peace (similar to general intercessions of the Roman Rite)	Confiteor; Introit antiphon	Rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water or penitential rite
	Hymn of the Incarnation	Kyrie	Kyrie
	Little entrance	Gloria	Gloria
	Tropars and kondaks (prayers of the day)	Collect	Opening prayer
	Trisagion (prayer of the Thrice-Holy God)		
“The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits.”			LITURGY OF THE WORD
	Epistle	Epistle	First reading
		Gradual	Responsorial psalm
			Second reading
		Munda cor meum	Alleluia or Gospel acclamation
	Gospel	Gospel	Gospel
“When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things.”	Sermon	Homily or sermon	Homily
		Nicene Creed	Profession of faith (Creed)
“Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves . . . and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.”	Litany of supplications		General intercessions
“When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss.”			
	MASS OF THE FAITHFUL	MASS OF THE FAITHFUL	LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST
	First prayer of the faithful; second prayer of the faithful; cherubic hymn		

Prayer wherein, by the words of consecration and the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; and Holy Communion. These actions are the essence of the “Mass of all ages,” whatever be the rite in which it is celebrated.⁷

Legitimate variation marks even the essential elements of the Mass. Different Scripture readings are read on the same day in different rites, or even at times in the same rite. Likewise, the offertory rite and manner of distributing Holy Communion differ in the different rites; in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, for example, Holy Communion is always distributed under both species, while in the Latin Rite it is distributed only sometimes under both species. The Byzantine Divine Liturgy and the current Roman Rite have a variety of Eucharistic Prayers, or anaphoras, while the 1962 Roman Missal had only one (the Roman Canon).

Even the words of the consecration that are necessary for validity (“This is My Body” and “This is My Blood”) have been embedded in slightly different phrases (see figure 1).

In an important development of doctrine, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, determined in 2001 that the words of Consecration need not be present “in a coherent narrative way and *ad litteram*” for transubstantiation to occur; the words may instead be present “in a dispersed eucharological way, that is, integrated in successive prayers of thanksgiving, praise, and intercession” (no. 3).⁸

Why Make Changes?

Some parts of the Mass, then, are unchangeable, while others are subject to change. While “the Church herself has no power over those things which were established by Christ Himself and which constitute an unchangeable part of the liturgy,”⁹ the Church’s Magisterium does have the authority to change the other parts of the Mass and has exercised that authority many times

over the centuries.¹⁰ Why might the Magisterium make changes in these parts of the Mass?

- The principal reason changes are made is that the “mystery of Christ is so unfathomably rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expression in any single liturgical tradition” (Catechism, no. 1201). Changes can be made to the Mass when the Magisterium comes to believe that such changes will more fully express the mystery of Christ. Thus Pope Paul VI enriched the Roman Missal with additional prefaces and Eucharistic Prayers “in order that the different facets of the mystery of salvation will stand out more clearly and that there will be more and richer themes of thanksgiving.”¹¹
- Pastoral charity can lead the Magisterium to change the rites of the Mass when the Gospel encounters a previously unevangelized culture. The Church teaches that the “celebration of the liturgy . . . should correspond to the genius and the culture of the different peoples. . . . [The mystery of Christ] must be proclaimed, celebrated, and lived in all cultures. . . . [T]he Church has the power and on occasion the duty to adapt [the liturgy] to the cultures of recently evangelized peoples” (Catechism, nos. 1204-05).
- When unsuitable elements creep into the Church’s liturgical life, the Magisterium may fittingly decree their removal. The Second Vatican Council, for example, decried mythological allusions that had worked their way into liturgical hymns.¹² Pope John Paul II has repeatedly “stressed the need to purify worship from ugliness of style, from distasteful forms of expression, from uninspired musical texts which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated, to guarantee dignity and excellence to liturgical compositions.”¹³
- The Mass is fittingly changed when rites suitable in one era become unsuitable in another, or when elements came to be duplicated.¹⁴
- Conversely, the Magisterium can restore parts of the Mass that in

<i>Figure 2 (continued)</i>			
“Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren.”	Great entrance	Offertory verse; offertory prayers	Preparation of the altar and the gifts
	Litany of the offertory		
	Nicene Creed		
		Secret	Prayer over the gifts
“He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks (in Greek: <i>eucharistian</i>) that we have been judged worthy of these gifts.”	Consecration (includes prayer like the preface and Sanctus)		Eucharistic Prayer
		Preface	Preface
		Sanctus	Acclamation (Holy, holy, holy)
		Roman Canon (includes Epiclesis)	Eucharistic Prayer (includes Epiclesis)
	Epiclesis		
“When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: ‘Amen.’”	Hymn to the Blessed Virgin		
			Communion Rite
	Litany of intercession	Communion Rite (Lord’s Prayer)	Lord’s Prayer
	Priest’s prayer for a worthy Communion		Doxology
	The Our Father (includes the peace, Communion of the priest, and Communion of the faithful)	The peace	Sign of peace
		Agnus Dei (includes priest’s preparation for Communion)	Breaking of the Bread (Lamb of God)
			Private preparation of the priest
“When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the ‘eucharisted’ bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.”		Communion of the priest; Communion of the faithful; ablutions	Communion
		Communion antiphon	Communion song
			Period of silence or song of praise
	Prayer of thanksgiving	Postcommunion	Prayer after Communion
			CONCLUDING RITE
		Final prayer and dismissal	Greeting
			Blessing
	Dismissal		Dismissal
	Ablution	Last Gospel	

previous times had fallen into disuse. The Second Vatican Council, for example, restored the general intercessions to the Roman Rite of the Mass.¹⁵

- Rites can be changed in order to “express more clearly the holy things they signify.”¹⁶
- Finally, rites can be changed to promote a more devout participation by faithful.¹⁷

Magisterial Observations

On March 25, 2004, the Congregation for Divine Worship, with the approval of Pope John Paul II, instructed the clergy and faithful on the importance of following liturgical norms. With sadness, the prefect and secretary of the congregation observed that “it is not possible to be silent about the abuses, even quite grave ones, against the nature of the liturgy and the sacraments as well as the tradition and the authority of the Church, which in our day not infrequently plague liturgical celebrations in one ecclesial environment or another. In some places the perpetration of liturgical abuses has become almost habitual, a fact which obviously cannot be allowed and must cease.”¹⁸

At the same time, the instruction, quoting Pope John Paul II, praised the recent changes in the liturgical rites: “Certainly the liturgical reform inaugurated by the Council has greatly contributed to a more conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar on the part of the faithful. . . . For promoting and elucidating active participation, the recent renewal of the liturgical books according to the mind of the Council fostered acclamations of the people, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and canticles, as well as actions or movements and gestures, and called for sacred silence to be maintained at the proper times, while providing rubrics for the parts of the faithful as well.”¹⁹

Mindful of these observations, let us approach the Holy Sacrifice of

the Mass, whatever be the rite in which it is celebrated, as if we were thirsty beggars, for in the liturgy we “draw abundantly the water of grace which flows from the side of the Crucified Christ. To use an image dear to Pope John XXIII, it is like the village fountain to which every generation comes to draw water ever living and fresh.”²⁰

¹ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 21.

² *Ibid.*, no. 22. Call (800) MY-FAITH or visit www.cuf.org to request our FAITH FACT “Effective Lay Witness Protocol” for help in dealing with illicit liturgical practices.

³ Matthew Bunson, gen. ed., *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac: 2004 Edition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2003), 173.

⁴ *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac: 2004 Edition*, 338-39.

⁵ Cf. Catechism, no. 1347.

⁶ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 66.

⁷ Cf. Catechism, nos. 1345-55.

⁸ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East* (July 20, 2001). Some Catholic newspapers have reported that in this document the Church abandoned her solemnly defined teaching that Christ's words of institution are necessary to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. These reports are false. The document, on the contrary, reaffirmed explicitly that “the Catholic Church considers the words of the Eucharistic Institution a constitutive and therefore indispensable part of the Anaphora or Eucharistic Prayer” (no. 3).

⁹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction on

Certain Matters to be Observed or to be Avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (March 25, 2004), no. 10.

¹⁰ “Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the bishop. In virtue of power conceded by the law, the regulation of the liturgy within certain defined limits belongs also to various kinds of competent territorial bodies of bishops legitimately established” [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), no. 22, par. 1-2].

¹¹ Apostolic Constitution *Missale Romanum* (April 3, 1969).

¹² Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 93.

¹³ Chirograph for the Centenary of the Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini* on Sacred Music (November 22, 2003), no. 3.

¹⁴ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 21, 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 50.

¹⁸ *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, nos. 4, 39.

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the 25th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (December 4, 1988), no. 22.

²¹ *First Apology*, nos. 65-67, in Catechism, no. 1345.

²² *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac: 2004 Edition*, 341-42 and <http://esoptron.umd.edu/UGC/Liturgy1.html>.

²³ <http://www.latinmass.org/mass/ordinary.html>.

²⁴ *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac: 2004 Edition*, 174-75 and Rev. James Socias, ed., *Daily Roman Missal* (Princeton, New Jersey: Scepter Publishers and Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1993), 548-745.

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RECOMMENDED READING

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*

James Likoudis and Kenneth Whitehead,

The Pope, The Council, and The Mass

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