

Home retreat – 8th May 2021

Coming Back to Mass



It is a year since many people have been able to attend a Sunday Mass “in the flesh” so to speak. We have been fortunate to have the technology to enable people to pray the Mass by live-streaming. And that has been very popular and very much appreciated – despite some early teething problems. Imagine if the pandemic had happened a decade or so ago? For many people this absence from church has made them even more aware of the importance of the Eucharistic celebration in their life, and the “prayer of spiritual communion” often said at the end of Mass has become a poignant longing for the time when the gift of the Body and Blood of the Lord can actually be received sacramentally.

I developed the habit when the lockdown first happened of logging into Mass each Sunday to try to have the experience of so many people – virtual Mass. Of course, we in the community have been so fortunate: our celebration of Mass and the Divine Office have continued throughout the past year. In fact, restrictions on travelling meant that more members of the community were present at each celebration than would have been in the past. God can always find a silver lining in the darkest cloud!

Watching Mass each Sunday on computer was a strange experience. At first it was hard not to treat it like watching a program on i-player and have a cup of tea or doing little jobs on my desk. It was an effort to focus on being at Mass, on really trying to make it a prayerful encounter with the Lord. I found I was spending more time preparing the readings beforehand to make the most of the celebration.

Of course, it is not the same as actually being present at Mass. In this short reflection I simply want to look again at the Mass (and I'm thinking of Sunday Mass) and how to enter more deeply into the celebration, a sort of refresher. I think all of us benefit from looking again and again at what we do so regularly to stop it becoming merely repetition. Soon, the restrictions on public worship will be lifted, please God. We will be able to celebrate properly as a community once again – in whatever part of the country you live. We will be able to enter more and more fully into the Mystery of Christ's love, his sacrifice on Calvary, which is the Eucharist. We need to be ready for Coming Back to Mass...

So, first of all, we need to prepare for Mass. Some while ago I became aware that I wasn't really preparing properly for the celebration of Mass. I'd certainly arrive on time, put on the vestments, perhaps chatting with people in the sacristy then begin. I felt that I needed to slow down, to recall what I was about to do, who I was about to encounter. I discovered the prayers that priests used to say before putting on each individual vestment and I started to use them partly just to slow down and take stock and try to get ready to leave all my busy-ness and enter a sacred space. So, I would encourage you to try and arrive a little before Mass starts to make your preparation. I know one priest who always takes off his watch before Mass to remind himself that he is about to enter the heavenly liturgy of which our Mass is a foretaste. Christ is Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end... the Lord of all time. We are about to enter that timeless mystery.



I know that is not always easy to arrive early, especially if you have other commitments or you are trying to get young children ready, but even the ritual of leaving home, perhaps wearing special clothes to mark the occasion, of entering the church building, blessing with Holy Water (when we're allowed!!) all help to prepare the heart and mind for a special encounter. There is also what we might call the "remote" preparation, the Eucharistic fast of one hour before Holy Communion. In one sense an hour is just a token gesture, hardly a hardship (it just means not eating on the way to church!) – yet it is a conscious reminder that what we are to receive is not simple food, but the Body and Blood of the Lord as food for our journey through life.

As the priest enters the sanctuary and all stand, we see him kiss the altar – first because the altar represents Jesus' body, which he sacrificed for us, with the altar cloths representing the cloths that wrapped the body of Jesus in the tomb, but also

because the altar table contains the relics of a saint. We are reminded of the early Christians who celebrated the Eucharist on the tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs, to honour their memory since they shed their blood just as Christ did, out of love for us. As we read in the Book of the Apocalypse, "I saw under the altar, the souls of them that were slain for the word of God." (Apoc 6:9) So right at the start we remember Christ is the altar, the priest and the lamb of sacrifice. It is his sacrifice that we share, that we celebrate together. In traditional altars, the priest would mount three steps up to the altar, one for each of the three persons of the Trinity, and also the virtues of faith, hope and charity, symbolizing the ascent to Mount Calvary and he would face the figure of Christ on the cross which hangs over the altar, just like the one underneath the arch here at Ampleforth:



At the start of the celebration we confess our sins. I always tell the children that Christ died for our sins – so let us offer him our sins that he might take them away... When we go to Mass we are like the good thief who hung at Jesus' right, upon the cross. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus' reply, "this day you will be with me in paradise." If he can say that to a convicted criminal, he can say it to you and to me. I knew someone who once complained that she did not like being told that she was a sinner at the start of every Mass. Yet, if we cannot face ourselves honestly before God we will never be able to change, to move on, to move out of our selfish pride. We confess not to make God feel better but so that we can be healed and grow. That examination of conscience can also be part of our preparation beforehand.

Then we turn from looking inward at ourselves and look towards God in the great hymn of glory: "Glory to God in the highest," the song that the angels sang at our Lord's birth in Bethlehem. Originally, it was only sung at Christmas, then its use spread to Sundays and all major feast days. Because it is a song of joy, it is not said in

Masses for the dead nor during the seasons of penitence – advent and lent. We raise our minds to give glory to God, and we join the angels in their everlasting praise of the Godhead in heaven. Some of the musical versions of the Gloria really evoke the mystery and the wonder of our God.

Now that we have talked to God – confessed our sins and given him praise – now God speaks to us in the **Liturgy of the Word**: the **Father** speaks to us through the prophets and other inspired works of the Bible in the old and new testament readings; the **Son** speaks to us through the words and events of his life in the Gospel; the **Holy Spirit** speaks to us through the teaching of the church, through the words of the priest in the homily. We stand to hear the Gospel, as we might stand when an important person enters the room because Jesus is present to us in the reading of his Word. We make a sign of the cross on our forehead, that we might listen and reflect on the Gospel, a cross on our lips – that we might speak the Gospel and on our heart, that we might ponder it in our deepest being – just as Mary did when the angel spoke the words of the annunciation

Again, if you can do a bit of preparation, the Liturgy of the Word will speak to a deeper level to your heart. Many people have a Sunday Missal, though you can get the readings from the internet. A good resource is Fr Henry's Wednesday Word, a reflection every Wednesday on the following Sunday's readings, to inspire Lectio Divina. Again, that can be downloaded easily.

After the creed (which would need an entire talk of its own) and bidding prayers, the offertory begins the second main part of the Mass – the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**. First of all, the priest offers the **bread**, the white host of unleavened bread, unleavened like the bread Jesus himself used at the Last Supper in the ritual Passover meal he shared with the apostles the night before he died. During the offertory it is important that we offer ourselves to God, lifting up our hearts to him along with the host on the paten. Bread symbolizes all of us who will be united in Christ through the Mass, just as many grains of wheat are united in the baking of a loaf. Bread is also a symbol of Christ. Bread nourishes our body, gives us strength; Christ in the Eucharist, nourishes our spiritual life. Then the host is placed on the square of line called a corporal (from the Latin meaning body) as it will soon become the very Body of Christ.



Then the priest adds **wine** to the chalice with a tiny drop of water. The wine stands for the divinity of Christ (it will soon really become Christ's blood). The water stands for you and me, united fully into Christ. "May we share in the divinity of Christ as he humbled himself to share our humanity..." Just as the wine and water are mingled in the chalice and can no longer be separated, by joining our sacrifice to the one on the altar, we hope to become one with Christ through the Eucharist. When God the Father receives the offering of his Son in the Mass, he receives us too. He forgives us our sins, our weaknesses and our faults because he loves the Son so much and we are with the Son.

Having said the prayers of offering the priest now prays to God to purify him. He prays for humility and contrition which are necessary to purify us from last sins; he asks God to bless our offering so that it too will be purified; and he washes his hands as a symbol of purity. During these prayers all should ask God to cleanse us of everything that would take us away from Christ.

The priest then asks the people to join him in offering or sacrifice to God: "pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father Almighty..." Each of us joins our own personal sacrifices in this life with Jesus' sacrifice, the perfect sacrifice. "Take up your cross and follow me," he had said.

Then the great prayer of thanks giving, the **Eucharistic Prayer** begins with its preface followed by the Sanctus, "holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts..." these are the words heard by the prophet Isaiah and St John during their visions of heaven. The dialogue ("lift up your hearts, we have lifted them up to the Lord; let us give thanks to the Lord our God; it is right and just...") are believed to have been instituted by the Apostles themselves. They signify that we are entering the holy of holies in the Mass.

There are four Eucharistic Prayers, each slightly different. I am here referring to the First prayer, the Roman Canon. You notice that the priest makes the sign of the cross over the gifts, asking God to accept the sacrifice to be offered. Then he begins a series of "remembrance prayers" or "commemorations" - some before and some after the consecration. The **first** remembrance prayer calls to mind the Church and all its members and all gathered at that celebration; in the **second** remembrance (or commemoration) we recall all those we wish to pray for (so don't forget to pray for all your special intentions); in the **third** prayer we remember the glorified saints in heaven, mentioning some by name: Our Lady, St Joseph...



At this point the priest lays his hands over the bread and wine (be pleased O Lord we pray to bless and approve this offering...) – a gesture which recalls the action of the High Priest in the old testament laying his hand over the sin offering asking that God might accept the blood of the animal victim in place of the blood of sinners. For us that victim is Christ, the Lamb of God!

There follows the **consecration** using the words Jesus used at the Last Supper – this is my Body. This is my Blood. The words effect a change in the substance of the bread and wine, although they appear to stay the same. Faith tells us they are now the Body and Blood of the Lord. For this reason, the priest genuflects in adoration. All should do the same. Many people repeat silently the words of St Thomas: “my Lord and my God.” For Jesus said, “my Body is real food and my Blood is real drink.” With these words the Old Covenant is fulfilled in the new: “This is the Blood of the new covenant...”



Sometimes people ask why there is a “double consecration” of the bread and then the wine. This represents sacramentally the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the bloody sacrifice on calvary when the blood was separated from the body of Christ in a *physical* way. The Lord shed his blood for us. In the Mass the sacrifice is completed by the blood being separated from the body in a *sacramental* way – because the Lord is glorified in heaven his body and blood are no longer separated. And in the Blessed Sacrament he is as he is in heaven – glorious and alive!

Therefore, Christ is present entirely – Body, Blood & Divinity under the form of both bread and wine. So, it is enough to receive Christ under one form (or one *species*): if we receive Holy Communion only in the form of bread (as all have had to do during this time of pandemic restrictions) we still receive the whole Christ.

As the Eucharistic prayer continues, we come to the fourth remembrance prayer – we pray for those in purgatory “those who have gone before us in faith” that their sins may be forgiven them. There is a slight pause so that we can all recall the names of loved ones (or pray for those who have no one to pray for them.) Then in the fifth remembrance prayer we pray for ourselves “your servants who, though sinners,

hope in your abundant mercies,” asking that we may join the saints in heaven – and there is another list of saints corresponding with that at the start of the prayer.

The consecration is the high point of the Mass. What follows mirrors the offertory part of the Mass – the prayers before Communion and then Holy Communion itself. It starts with the prayer that Jesus gave his followers, the **Our Father**: “give us this day our daily bread... forgive us our trespasses...” At the end of the Our Father we ask to be delivered from evil; we ask God to free us from past evils (our bad habits, our sins) from present evils (temptations, sickness and anxiety) and from future evils (our sins, injury and death). And we pray for peace – in our hearts and in our world.

At this point the priest breaks the host into two (just as our Lord’s body was broken on the cross) as we say or sing, “Lamb of God...” recalling the words of John the Baptist when he saw Jesus on the banks of the Jordan. Jesus indeed is the Lamb of God who is slain for us. The priest breaks off a tiny piece of host and places it in the chalice so that the Body of Christ under the form of bread mingles with the blood of Christ under the form of wine – reminding us that the Lord’s Body and Blood were reunited on Easter Sunday when Christ rose from the dead.



At one time, it was common to reserve the particle broken from the host for the next day’s Mass. These particles could also be shared with other churches – the shared particles of host signified the unity of each and every celebration of the Mass in the one Sacrifice of the Cross.

When the priest holds the Host above the altar, saying “behold the Lamb of God...” all respond with a very beautiful prayer, the prayer first said by a pagan Roman soldier who showed great faith in Jesus: “Lord I am not worthy to have you under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

It is interesting that up until this point the prayers of the Mass have been addressed to God the Father or the Trinity. Now the priest addresses Christ himself, the sacrificial lamb who lies on the altar.

The blood of the Passover lamb saved the Israelites from the angel of death, enabling them to escape slavery in Egypt. Now in the New Covenant, the blood of the Lamb,

which is Christ, saves us from the death of sin and gives us the grace which is food for our souls. Behold, the Lamb of God!



Then comes the time for **Holy Communion**, to approach the Lord, ready to receive him. It can sometimes feel a bit rushed, but take time on the way back to your seat and spend a few moments in thanksgiving, aware that like those first apostles at the Last Supper you have received the Lord's Body and Blood, His flesh is real food and his blood is real drink. Try to take time to have a moment of thanksgiving, to feel the presence of the Lord, who is with you.

In no time at all comes the final prayer and blessing and dismissal. If you can, try to stay for a while to be with Jesus in your soul. In the Eucharist, Jesus comes to be with us as he did on that first Christmas day so long ago. In a way, every Mass is like Christmas Day, so: Happy Christmas!

If you haven't been able to yet, I hope that you can soon get to Mass and that you are able to appreciate ever more the gift that Christ offers us if we are open to receive it – his very self. May that gift transform you and enable you to lead others to Christ.

In essence that is what the Mass is about – Jesus sharing himself at the deepest level, so that we can in turn share ourselves in friendship with our brothers and sisters. As St Aelred of Rielvaux said, that friendship we experience on earth is the stepping-stone to friendship with God. May that grow ever deeper in all of us.