

## **History of the Mass – Lecture Synopsis** **Deacon Bartholomew J. Merella, M.T.S.**

**Introduction.** This is a very brief summary of my lecture on the History of the Mass, given on March 30/31 as part of the Cathedral's Lenten series. Summarizing 2000 years of liturgical history in a 60 minute talk was difficult in its own right, so this summary perforce touches only the most significant developments that occurred during the 20 centuries of Catholicism.

There is an old Latin axiom often used in describing events in the Church's life, namely "semper eadem, semper reformanda," translated "always the same, always changing." It is an apt axiom to describe the history of the Mass. There are also some other key "idiomata" that are applicable to the Eucharistic liturgy: "summit and source of our faith," "full, active and conscious participation," and St. Augustine's famous "you become what you eat (Christ)." Before launching into the highlights, the reader should be mindful that this is a description, not a critique, of the historical developments of the Mass. In brief, the history takes us from that small room where they reclined at table and Jesus took the bread and wine and blessed it to the parish churches and great cathedrals in which Eucharist is celebrated today.

To help understand this "hop, skip and jump" through 2000 years, the overview will be divided into seven (7) time periods: 1) Emerging Christianity (33-100AD); 2) The Domestic Church (100-313AD); 3) Rise of the Roman Church (313-750AD); 4) Normalizing the Liturgy (750-1073AD); 5) Prelude to Reform (1073-1517AD); 6) Reform and Counter-Reform (1517-1903); and 7) Renewal, Reaction and Unfolding Vision (1903-Tomorrow). In each of these time periods, the Mass is impacted by many contributing factors that may not seem obvious at the outset, but become apparent, as we march through the course of history, namely: 1) cultural; 2) linguistic; 3) ritual/attire; 4) institutional; 5) political; 6) demographic; 7) architecture and art; 8) music; 9) sociological; and 10) especially theological. So to begin!

**Emerging Christianity (33-100AD).** One of the major external influences of this time is the demise of Jewish governance occasioned by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The early Jews, as Christians, are dispersed and can gather to worship only in the home. This occurred at the evening meal as they typically sat around the small table on mats and used the regular blessing or "berakah" format. The meal included readings from Hebrew scripture and a retelling of the stories of Jesus, especially the story of the last meal before his death. These early followers remembered the manner in which Christ blessed the food, using the common bread and wine prevalent at that time. As more and more Gentiles became Christian, the "berakah" (blessing) format of the Hebrew style of meal celebration migrated to a form emphasizing "eucharistia" (thanksgiving), a style more common to the Gentile culture.

**Domestic Church (100-313AD).** As Christianity spreads throughout the Roman empire, governmental persecution often drives those gathering underground (i.e. catacombs) affecting how the meal/worship is celebrated. During less stressful periods, the dining rooms of wealthy citizens provide sufficient reclining space for the growing assemblies to celebrate the memorial meal. Since some Christians were unable to join the gathering,

members crafted a small box (pyx) to bring home a piece of the blessed breadloaf shared at the Mass. Also, the shift in daily language from popular Greek to common Latin now influences the Christian experience of worship. For example, “sacramentum” replacing “mysterion” describes the worship in a way that changes its character. Similarly, philosophy begins to influence the way Christians understand the celebration (i.e. its concepts vs practices). The “Didache” and the “Didascalia Apostolorum” are the first formal documents setting forth the worship (Mass) ritual or rubrics. Along with these documents are beginnings of the distinctive liturgical and ecclesial roles of the “episcopos” (bishop), “diaconos” (deacon) and “presbyteros” (elder or priest), needed as local Christian communities become more numerous.

**Rise of the Roman Church (313-750AD).** In this era, worship (Mass) can now be celebrated without retribution since the Emperor Constantine recognizes Christianity as a public religion. Also, the first large public structure is built in the form of a basilica to house the Mass, called St. Peter’s. The elongated, structural shape shifts the location of the altar close to the rear wall, thereby discouraging the assembly from gathering around the table of the Lord. Use of Latin and inclusion of the Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei emerge as standards of the Mass, along with use of specific ritual books. Hosts instead of breadloafs and the rise of large pyxes (called tabernacles) for reserved hosts become more common. Theological issues now affect the age for receiving communion, how and when the host and wine are changed to Christ’s body/blood, the person’s worthiness to receive communion (Pelagianism) and what (i.e. Jesus: flesh or spirit) is being received in the host/wine (Arianism).

**Normalizing the Liturgy (750-1073AD).** In this era, the Church is being severely impacted as Islam expands and reaches the heart of Europe almost to Paris before being halted and thrown back by Charlemagne and the rise of the Holy Roman Empire. To unify his empire, Charlemagne decrees that one style of Mass will be celebrated throughout the empire. Architecture exerts significant influence as the new Romanesque style of churches results in altars being fixed to the wall, choir chapels and rood screens separating the assembly from the altar and multiple chapels being erected to facilitate “private” masses. The rise of choirs and the rise of personal “unworthiness” further suppress the people’s direct participation in the Mass and their reception of communion. And its reception is now limited to the host, no longer received in the hand but more on the tongue. The increased use of liturgical books emphasizes the roles of deacon, priest and bishop and de-emphasizes the people gathered. The most important theological influence on the Mass is the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> century debates featuring the theological scholars Paschasius, Ratramnus and Berengar who debated about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This led to the synods in 1059 and 1079 affirming the “real” presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. This issue is a precursor to the later debates regarding “transubstantiation” on how and when the bread and wine becomes Christ.

**Prelude to Reform (1073-1517AD).** During this period, the several crusades, the developing monarchical and papal power, the founding of the Franciscan and Dominican orders and the beginnings of the university system (Paris, Bologna and Oxford) have their

particular impact on the ritual of Mass. The rise of Gothic church architecture precipitates the practice of elevating the host and the companion ringing of bells so that people can see the consecrated bread. People are now essentially spectators rather than participants which causes the emergence of Eucharistic adoration and the use of highly ornate monstrances for exposition as an alternative. The silent Mass is another result of the people's diminished liturgical role. These changes are reinforced by the renewal of the 9<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century debate on the theology of "presence" in which Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus furiously debate the issue of what and how the "transubstantiation" of bread/wine takes place. It is an issue that won't be solved until the 16<sup>th</sup> century Council of Trent. All this further reduces the people's direct role in the Mass in a way that Mass is more understood as a noun rather a verb.

**Reform and Counter-Reform (1517-1903AD).** The 16<sup>th</sup> century begins with the second major rupture of Christianity caused by the Protestant reformation. The theological challenges of Luther and others caused both political and religious division, leading powerful kings and princes to mandate which version of Christianity would be the official religion and worship of their realm. Finally, the pope convened the Council of Trent resulting in theological and ritual decisions that reformed the Mass, such as the formal doctrine of transubstantiation. The publication in 1570 of the new Roman Missal became the liturgical touchstone for the next 500 years. Still, Trent's reforms were not uniformly applied, as evidenced by the rise of Gallicanism, Josephinism and the Synod of Pistoia affecting celebration of Mass. Also, the rise of the highly ornate Baroque and Rococco architecture intensified focus on the sanctuary, the altar and tabernacle further de-emphasizing the assembly's participation, other than to watch the priest, who is now pre-eminent. The assembly's primary role now is to listen to the homily preached from magnificent pulpits which led to the increased use of pews in many churches. The dependence on highly trained choirs to sing the more complicated religious music composed during these centuries further de-emphasized the people's role; the people now used devotional practices, such as the rosary and prayerbooks, to be spiritually occupied during the Mass. Even though the Roman rite becomes the universal norm for the Mass, some attempts were made to localize the celebration, such as those sought by Matteo Ricci (Chinese) and John Carroll (American), in the manner of the existing Ambrosian, Mozarabic and other approved rites for the Mass. This reflected the Church's tremendous growth from its world-wide missionary efforts.

**Renewal, Reaction and Unfolding Vision (1903-Tomorrow).** Most Catholics and others are familiar with the major renewal in the Mass as currently celebrated. Yet, the average person is unaware that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy issued in 1963 by the Second Vatican Council was the culmination of almost 100 years of effort involving the renewal of the Mass. It began in the early 1800s with research on the Roman rite by the Benedictine Abbot Gueranger and then his confrere, Lambert Beaudin, who wrote on the people's participation in the Mass, so greatly diminished over the course of centuries. This renewal of the people's active participation was officially encouraged in quick order. Benedict XV permitted the Slavic people (1920) to celebrate Mass in their language, followed by Pius XI's permission for the Mass in German (1929). Pius X also was an important influence with his decrees on the frequency and early reception of

Communion. Pius XII encouraged further expansion of these renewal efforts by issuing “Mediator Dei”. Other great liturgical theologians in Europe and the United States were writing extensively about how the Mass could retrieve its ancient form and enable Catholics to bring alive the liturgy in their everyday lives. Not without reason, music in Mass was also changing significantly to reflect the increased role of the people and their desire to sign as a sign of the participation. Concurrently, modern architecture was beginning to have a direct effect on the design of churches in a way that greatly fostered the participation and renewal of the Mass decreed by Vatican II. This major liturgical renewal further enhanced the tremendous growth in Catholicity across the world, including the indigenous style in which the Mass is celebrated in many countries. Eminent liturgical and other scholars continue to study the 2000 years of celebrating the Mass for its impact on the future of the Church and the world. So we finish as we started in understanding the history of the Mass: “semper eadem, semper reformanda (always the same, always renewing)” to emphasize the full, active and conscious participation of the people who become what they share and eat (Christ).

#### **Sources for the lecture content:**

- “From Age to Age” by Edward Foley, OFM
- “The Didache” by Thomas O’Loughlin
- “History of the Liturgy: Its Major Stages” by Marcel Metzger
- “Celebration of the Eucharist: The Origin of the Rite and the Development of its Interpretation” by Enrico Mazza
- “The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development” by Joseph Jungmann, SJ

### **Audience Questions**

These are some of the questions that attendees asked about the lecture.

1. **Q.** What dictates the color of vestments worn for the Mass? **Ans:** The particular vestment colors (white, red, green and violet) correspond to the liturgical calendar of the Church. For many centuries, white was the only color used but other colors began to be used until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the current colors became the norm. Typically white (Easter/Christmas seasons and other solemn feasts; red (Pentecost, the apostles and martyrs); green (ordinary time) and violet (Lent/Advent).
2. **Q.** Why does the frequency of people receiving Communion not coincide with their frequency of confession? **Ans:** This is not a history of Mass issue; rather requires a particular discussion of the sacraments.
3. **Q.** What are some good books on the history of the Mass? **Ans:** Edward Foley’s book “From Age to Age.” See below also.

4. **Q.** In the early church (33-100AD), when there were not “officially, formally ordained” priests, who consecrated the bread and wine? **Ans:** The short answer is the early communities selected their leader who was ultimately recognized by an apostle or successor to bless (consecrate) the bread and wine. Keep in mind that people at that time did not use or understand the word “consecration.”

5. **Q.** Was changing church architecture really the reason people stopped receiving Communion? **Ans:** As people became further removed from the table over-time by its location, they inevitably became and felt further removed from the bread (body) and wine (blood). Other important theological issues involving the Eucharist over-time also reinforced people’s perceived unworthiness to receive Communion.

6. **Q.** After Vatican II, why did churches start moving the tabernacle all over the place and away from the focus of the congregation? **Ans:** In the Mass, the table of the Lord (altar) is always the center of attention, distinguished as such by the principle ministers bowing to, kissing and incensing it. The tabernacle is secondary for use only when a consecrated host was needed as Communion for the sick and dying and for Eucharistic exposition. In Catholic communities especially in mission places, one can find only the Table of the Lord and no evidence of a tabernacle, as was the situation for Christianity until the small pyxes became tabernacles about the 12<sup>th</sup> century.