

history of the mass

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ~ 1 Corinthians 10:16

FOR SOME, the Mass (The Celebration of the Eucharist) may appear as a confusing conglomeration of rituals, making it difficult to worship. This generates a number of questions. Where do all these rituals come from? Are they biblical? What do they mean?

“Father . . . look with favor on these offerings and accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek” (*The Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I).

More than anything else, the Mass is a sacrifice that re-presents (makes present again) the one single sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a memorial of his Passover; in fact it is often called the Sacrifice of the Mass. Before he was given up to death, Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. This took place during the Jewish feast of Passover when the whole People of Israel celebrate their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Taking the common elements of this feast (bread, wine, and the sacrificial lamb), Jesus substituted himself as the perfect lamb and changed the bread and wine into his body and blood. He did this in preparation for his supreme sacrifice of love on the cross that would make our salvation possible.

Along with the Passover, other Old Testa-

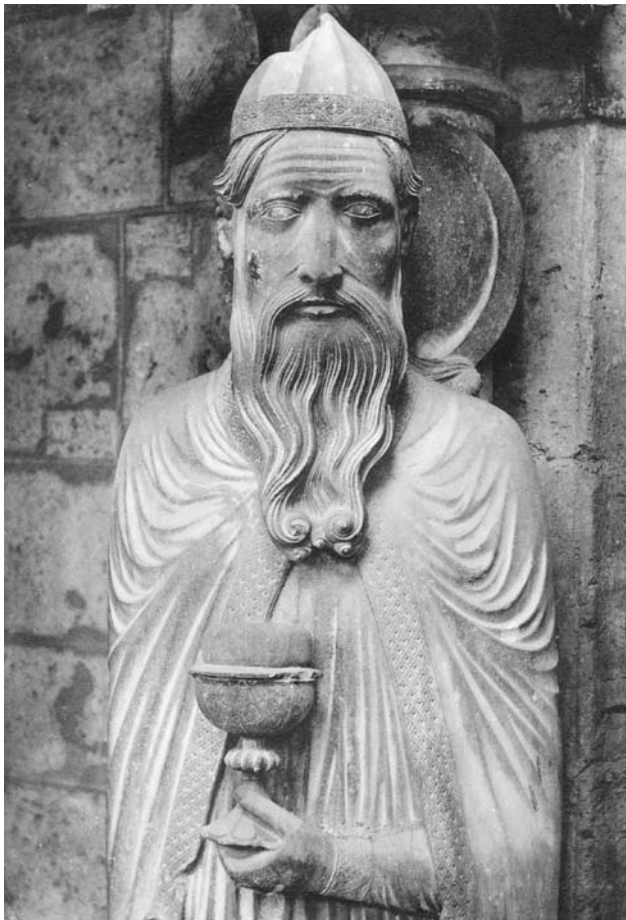
ment sacrifices serve as well to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ. Abel offered God the firstlings of his flock, and “*the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering*” (Gn 4:4). Abel’s righteousness was pleasing to God and, out of envy, his brother Cain killed him. In a similar manner, the ruling body of the Jews, Jesus’ own people, ensured Jesus’ death.

Later, in the life of Abraham, God asked for the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. This was Abraham’s most challenging and painful test of faith. Isaac was his only son.

Abraham, who loved God, went up the mountain to sacrifice his son out of obedience to the Lord. But an angel called out to Abraham: “*Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*” (Gn 22:12). Abraham’s offering of Isaac reminds us of the perfect offering of Jesus, the only Son of the Father, on the cross. The once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus is re-presented (made present) every time we celebrate the Mass.

Another sacrifice God found pleasing was that of the priest-king Melchizedek, who offered bread and wine and called down a blessing upon Abraham. Jesus, who is our new and eternal priest-king, also chose to offer bread and wine at the time of the Last Supper. Included in this offering was a blessing that called upon the Holy Spirit to sanctify the Church.

“The once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus is re-presented every time we celebrate the Mass.”



Statue of Melchizedek on the exterior of the Cathedral of Chartres, France, dating from the 15th century

The Mass and the Early Church

The Acts of the Apostles tells us a great deal about the early celebration of the Eucharist. By the time of Paul's preaching, there seems to be a definite practice of coming together to break bread on Sunday (see Acts 20:7).

Most of the early Christians were Jewish converts, and the way they worshiped in the synagogue shaped their celebration of Mass. The structure of Scripture readings and responses are adapted from the liturgy of the synagogue.

From a letter written about 150 AD, by a Christian philosopher named Justin, it is clear that the Mass had developed very early into its present structure. He wrote that the Christians gathered on the day of the sun (Sunday) and "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read" (Liturgy of the Word). After the "presider" exhorted the assembly to "imitate the good examples" of the readings (Homily), bread and wine were brought forward (Presentation of the Gifts) and prayers were said (Eucharistic Prayer). Justin wrote that the bread and wine were called Eucharist because "by the Eucharistic (Thanksgiving) prayer," this food is changed into "the flesh and blood of the incarnated Jesus" (Consecration). Next, "there is the distribution to each and the participation in the Eucharistic elements" (Communion). During the time of Justin, Christians were persecuted and sometimes killed because of their faith. Consequently, the liturgy or worship service was kept simple and the place of worship kept unadorned since they had to meet in secret.

*A deacon lights the
Paschal Candle in
preparation for Mass
during the Easter
season*

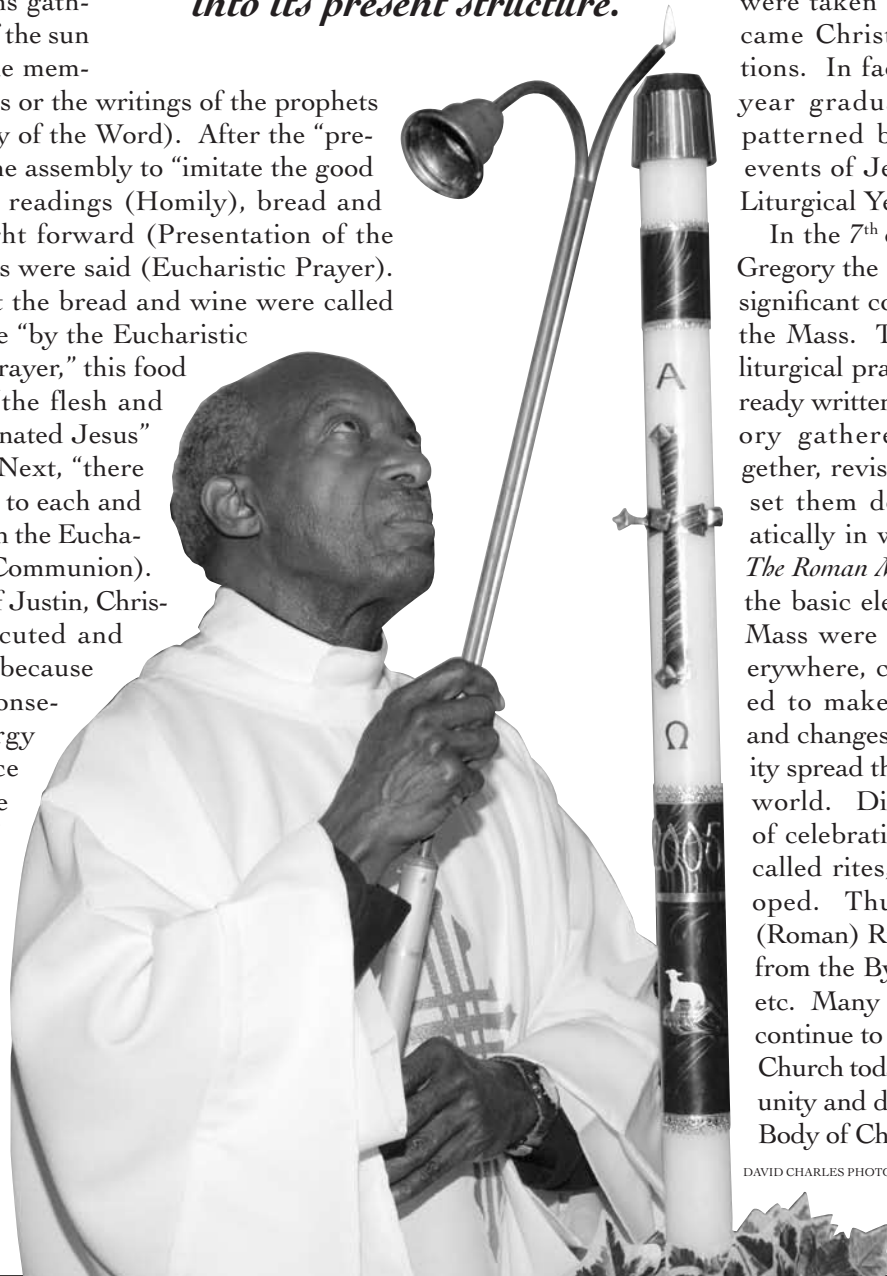
The Mass and the Middle Ages

Once Christianity was no longer persecuted and Christians were free to practice their faith openly, large public buildings called basilicas became places of worship. The Mass became more elaborate without alteration to its basic structure. In Rome, persons of honor and authority wore clothing that was made from fine materials and meant to display the distinction they held in society as public servants. With a similar understanding and authority, bishops, priests and deacons began to wear vestments to display their distinct roles in virtue of their office as servants of the People of God, the Church. Also,

days that had once been feasts in honor of various Greek and Roman gods were taken over and became Christian celebrations. In fact, the whole year gradually became patterned by the major events of Jesus' life (the Liturgical Year).

In the 7th century Pope Gregory the Great made a significant contribution to the Mass. Though many liturgical prayers were already written, Pope Gregory gathered them together, revised them, and set them down systematically in what is called *The Roman Missal*. While the basic elements of the Mass were the same everywhere, cultures tended to make adaptations and changes as Christianity spread throughout the world. Different ways of celebrating the Mass, called rites, were developed. Thus, the Latin (Roman) Rite is different from the Byzantine Rite, etc. Many different rites continue to survive in the Church today, as a sign of unity and diversity in the Body of Christ.

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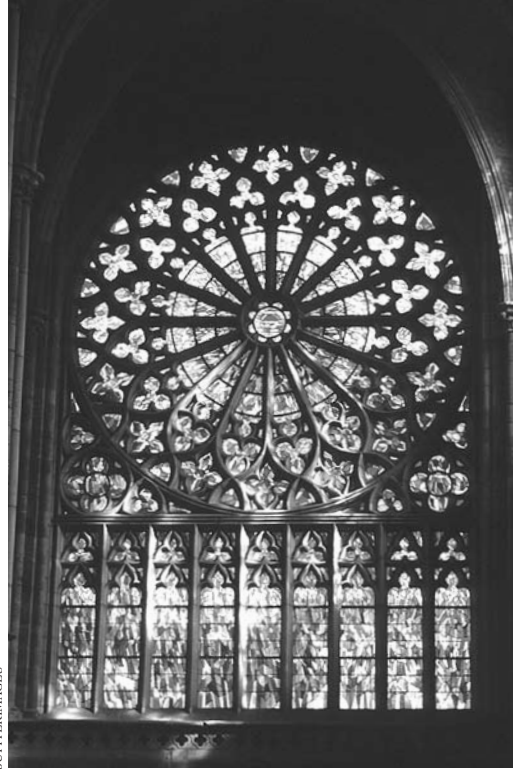
The Mass and the Council of Trent

The Council of Trent (1545-1563), like other major Church councils, was a gathering of the bishops or their representatives with the Pope in order to discuss the issues of the day in light of Catholic teaching. This Council was convened to make clear what aspects of the faith the Protestant Reformers were rejecting and to restate the Church's official teaching.

Many of the reformers rejected the sacrificial nature of the Mass and disbelieved in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Council Fathers found it necessary to define the sacrificial nature of the celebration and to emphasize Catholic teaching that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist — body, blood, soul, and divinity — under the appearance of bread and wine. This teaching led to a genuine reform of the liturgy that developed a disciplined order for the celebration of Mass called the Tridentine Mass. This form of celebration, which was highly structured and very beautiful, was intended to emphasize the tremendous holiness associated with celebrating the Eucharist and being in the presence of and actually receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The Mass and Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was convened to foster renewal and increase the vitality of the Christian life. With this aim in mind, the Pope and



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Catholics should give thanks for “the fact that the table of the Word of God is now more abundantly furnished for all ... for the increased participation of the faithful ... in the Eucharist ... for the radiant vitality of so many Christian communities, a vitality drawn from the wellspring of the Liturgy” (*Vicesimus Quintus Annus*). Like the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus, we, too, at the wellspring of liturgy hear him say, “*whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst*” (Jn 4:14).

(CCC 1333, 1345)

the bishops launched a reform of the liturgy. Many bishops around the world had expressed concern over a lack of participation in the Mass. In order to correct this, the Council Fathers decided, among other things, to allow the use of the vernacular (everyday language instead of Latin) in the liturgy, and mandated a more abundant use of Sacred Scripture. They also called for a revision in the *Roman Missal*, the book of prayers used at Mass, to include a wider variety of prayers.

Vatican II, like all other Church councils, recognized the liturgy as the principal source of power and grace for the Church. By keeping in mind the rich cultural traditions found throughout the world and by allowing for greater freedom in how the Mass could be celebrated, the liturgy which emerged from Vatican II has increased the participation of the faithful and, in many ways, has renewed the Church. Pope John Paul II has said that