

The Mass (2)
Understanding How We Worship
Preparing to Hear God's Word

Last week I wrote about the significance of our gathering as a community of faith and the procession of the priest and other ministers into the church. I noted that *we are gathered by the risen Lord* to celebrate Mass, and that we enter the sanctuary *following the cross* because we are followers of the crucified Christ. Finally we place the Book of the Gospels on the altar thereby showing the unity of Word and Sacrament. This week I am writing about those things we do to prepare ourselves to hear the word of God.

The Sign of the Cross: We begin by blessing ourselves in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By making the sign of the cross, we summarize the whole of our faith in a simple gesture: (1) the cross that we make reminds us that we have been saved by Christ's death and resurrection on the cross. (2) By blessing ourselves in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we profess our faith in the Trinity.

The Greeting: After we have signed ourselves with the cross, the priest says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you," and we respond, "and with your Spirit." By this simple opening dialogue, the priest and congregation remind each other of God's presence. We are standing in the presence of the all Holy God who offers us grace, love, communion. This is no ordinary assembly; it is the Assembly of God's saints, God's holy ones.

The Penitential Rite: Before we can hear the Word of God our minds and hearts must be purified. How can we possibly receive into our hearts the Word of God if we are burdened with sin? Because we are constantly in need of mercy and forgiveness, we call to mind our sins and we ask for God's mercy. This is an important moment that should not be rushed. We should take a moment to reflect on our need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Once we have done this, we can ask for God's mercy. At the end of the litany (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy), the priest pronounces an absolution upon us that assures us that our ordinary everyday sins are forgiven. With hearts purified we are ready to hear God's Word.

Gloria: After the penitential rite we sing the Gloria, the same hymn that the angels sang at the birth of the Savior. In doing this, we sing "Glory to God in the highest," thereby acknowledging that God alone is holy. The Gloria that we sing is the response of a grateful people whose sins have been forgiven. The next time you sing or recite the Gloria, pay careful attention to the words. This is a beautiful prayer you can use in your own prayer life every day.

Opening Prayer: The introductory rites of Mass conclude with an Opening Prayer or Collect, in which the priest summarizes the prayers of the entire congregation. This is not an easy prayer to understand since the present translation is often complicated and convoluted. But if you listen carefully, you will notice the richness of this prayer that summarizes the central themes of the liturgy. They are worth meditating upon.

We are now ready for the first great moment in the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word. We have been gathered by the risen Christ; we have followed the crucified Christ into the sanctuary; we have blessed ourselves in the name of the Trinity; we have asked for God's forgiveness; we have praised God for God's glory; and we have summarized the thoughts of our hearts in the

Opening Prayer. There is only one thing left to do: to listen to the Word of God, the topic of next week's column. *Father Matera*