

# THE SHAPE OF THE MASS

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THE ROMAN LITURGY has a classical shape whose rules govern what the Church does in its celebrations. It would appear to be important for us, who perform the liturgy, to learn this shape and to be conscious of it in forming the assembly.

The Mass falls into two halves, more or less. The first part is **the liturgy of the Word**, and the second part is **the liturgy of the Eucharist**.

**The first half** is based more or less exactly on what happened in the Jewish synagogue, to which Jesus went every Sabbath for readings from the Scripture, for the teaching of the Rabbi, and for prayers (*sunagoge* is a Gk word meaning "prayer together"). The great difference between the Synagogue and the Church is the presence, in the Church, of the New Testament. In other ways the Roman Liturgy of the Word corresponds rather closely to that which made up the Synagogue service on an average Sabbath.

Here a reader (*hazzan*, who is not ordained and can be anyone) leads the prayers, to which the others respond by saying *Amen* (synagogue services were, from roughly the time of Jesus, translated into a language people could understand, and conducted in Aramaic or Greek). The basic texts are drawn from Deuteronomy (6:4-9, 11:11-21) and Numbers (15:37-41); to these basic texts were added the Eighteen Prayers (*Sh'mone esre*) for knowledge, forgiveness, health and material well-being, the fulfilment of messianic hopes, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple, peace. Psalms, and prayers from great teachers of the past, were added, so that, although the Temple liturgy has never been restored since AD 70, it has left its mark on the Jewish liturgy of today: the prayers are arranged to coincide with the ancient times of prayer in Jerusalem (morning, noon, evening) and it is worth noting that this has come down to us in the shape of the Divine Office or breviary and in the monastic Office. Jews still face Jerusalem when at prayer. The extra sacrifices offered on Sabbaths, New Moons, and Festivals, are represented by extra prayers in synagogues.

Readings from the Torah and the Prophets form the service of the Word. It is on these, and on the venerated translations of them into Aramaic (*Targum*) and Greek, that the Rabbi preaches. The Torah is divided into weekly parts, so that the whole of the Scripture is read in rotation. There is a body of verses describing the Jerusalem festivals, which have become so venerable as to form part of the liturgical tradition of Jews. These have become incorporated into liturgical practice, very much more than is the case among us - although it is hard to imagine Christmas without *O Come All Ye Faithful*. *Sephardim* (Mediterranean Jews) and *Ashkenazim* (Central/North European Jews) differed in their prayer traditions. A great unifying factor was always the Calendar, which remains constant.

Note that the spiritual head of a Jewish community is not a priest but a Rabbi (= teacher). This fixes very firmly the tone of Jewish worship as a liturgy of the word, not of the sacraments, which do not occur in Judaism.

What we add to the Synagogue service is basically an act of repentance at the beginning, and the canticle of the angels from the Gospel (Gloria), and the Gospel and Apostolic readings - an enlarged Scriptural sourcing, as it were. Nothing else in the Mass would be out of place in the Synagogue.

The Second Part of the Mass is based upon what happened in an upper room in Jerusalem on

the day before the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. In the oldest form of the tradition, we have our oldest guaranteed narrative from the life of Jesus (1Cor 11). We are told that Jesus did four things: he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples.

The first deed of this part of the Mass is the *taking* of the bread and cup. It also relates to the command of Jesus to prepare what they needed for the Passover: we set the table (offertory procession). The presence of a collection reminds us that this was once a tremendous opportunity for an outpouring of solidarity within the community: gifts were brought up for the clergy - more extensive than now - and for the poor. This actually is also a link with the Jerusalem Temple, where part of the sacrifices was reserved for the support of the priests, and the tithe system was the sharing of the eleven other tribes in the support of the Levites, who had no inheritance of land in the traditional partition of the Promised Land. The blessings over the bread and the Cup are taken from the Jewish Berakhoth at the Sabbath meal. The theme of sacrifice is introduced at this point; we are not only remembering a community meal, we are also offering, or joining in with the offering of, the self-sacrifice of Jesus to his Father. Our solidarity with Jesus is therefore the most important thing to understand at the offertory; we throw our lot in with Jesus, so that he may become the meaning of our experience.

In the Eucharistic prayer, the Church expresses the *blessing* of the bread and cup. We are redirecting the bread and wine away from their earthly destiny and into the hands of Christ. In this action we redirect our lives to be part of his sacrifice, and the theme here is of death and resurrection. The ramifications are endless. We are redirecting our lives away from earthly inspirations and frames of reference, into the context of something more salvific. This is therefore an experience of very deep conversion or transformation, and it is in this context that we speak of *transubstantiation*.

When the Eucharistic prayer is over a theme of communion is established: we recite the Lord's prayer, and after praying for a share in his peace, we exchange a sign of peace with one another; this is a laying-open of our desire for peace which our communion will fulfil. This is the setting for the breaking of bread itself - a short action to perform, but of tremendous significance (it used to be the synonym for the Mass itself).

Then comes the Communion, the sharing of the gifts of Christ among the whole community. This completes the obedience to the command of Christ - *do this in memory of me* - which is the *raison d'être* of the whole exercise.