



Why Go to Mass?

by Bishop Michael Evans



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INTRODUCTION

‘Going to Mass’ has always been a key sign of a committed Catholic, from those first Christians who met in their houses for ‘the breaking of bread’ (Acts 2:42, 46), to Catholics who risked their lives by celebrating Mass during times of persecution, to those Catholics today who make a conscious choice to take an active part in the life and worship of the Church. In every century there have been Catholics who have opted out of the Church’s worship, but taking part in the Mass, above all on Sundays, has always been seen as central and crucial for living fully the Catholic faith and life. Coming to Mass, taking part in a Catholic Eucharist every Sunday, is still the main visible sign of being a Catholic. Living the Mass, taking an active part in it and allowing its power to transform our lives, is what being a Catholic is all about (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1389, 2177–9; all references are to this Catechism unless otherwise noted).

The central importance of the Mass or Eucharist is something strongly reaffirmed by the *Catechism*: the Eucharist is ‘the source and summit of ecclesial life’, ‘the sum and summary of our faith’ (n. 1327), ‘the most blessed Sacrament’ and ‘the Sacrament of sacraments’ (nn. 1211, 1330), and it ‘remains the centre of the

Church's life' (n. 1343). Why? Because it 'contains' and makes present the living mystery of Christ, Christ himself, and his saving work of bringing the whole human race into communion with his Father. If we really understood the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Good News of salvation, and if we grasped fully the truth that the Eucharist is the making present, here and now, of all that Jesus has achieved for us, we would need no urging to come to Mass.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The *Catechism* gives us the essential content of the Catholic faith in the light of the Second Vatican Council and of the whole of the Church's Tradition. Obviously, therefore, there is nothing radically different about its teaching on the Eucharist, but there are refreshingly new ways of looking at the ancient doctrine.

The very first article of the *Catechism* reminds us of God's overall plan: God draws close to us so that we can share his own life; he calls us to seek him, know him and love him; he calls us together into the unity of his family, the Church. This is the key to understanding the mystery of the Eucharist.

As Christ's Eucharistic people, we are all challenged to develop our doctrine on the Eucharist, to mature in our Eucharistic faith, and to become ever more deeply Eucharistic persons and communities (n. 23).

Celebrating the Christian Mystery

Many think that Part Two of the *Catechism* (Celebrating the Christian Mystery) is its best. In presenting the liturgy and sacraments, it is especially open to the insights of Eastern Christians, particularly in its emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. The order of the *Catechism* is significant: Creed (our faith professed), Sacraments (our faith celebrated), Commandments (our faith lived), rather than Creed, Commandments, Sacraments. The latter order can lead to understanding the sacraments simply as powerful aids to keeping the Commandments, rather than as the key ways in which we share in the mystery of Christ here and now, a participation which leads us to a new way of life.

We come to Mass to share in the wonder of our Father's love, to participate in the saving work of Jesus his Son, and to be transformed by the Spirit of holiness. From our Sunday celebration, we go forth together to be and to live what we have celebrated. For the rest of the week (or for the rest of the day if we go to Mass more often) our life as Christian communities, families and individuals flows from the Mass and looks towards the next celebration. Every Mass is also a reminder that there is a greater life to come: in the Eucharist we already share that heavenly life, and look forward to its fulfilment: 'We hope to enjoy for ever the vision of your glory' (Eucharistic Prayer 3).

All of this may seem strange to any Catholics who come to Mass simply because they have always done so, because they see it merely as their ‘Sunday obligation’, or because someone else – parents perhaps, or school - demands they come. Why does the Catholic Church insist so strongly on the need to come to Mass? We all need to think more deeply about the Mass and what it means. In this short pamphlet I can do no more than give a few thoughts for reflection, rooted in the *Catechism*. There is so much more that can be said.

THE EUCHARIST AND THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

One special merit of the *Catechism* is its emphasis on the Holy Trinity as the central mystery of our faith. This is especially true of its teaching on the liturgy, the Church's public worship. The Father is the source and goal of the liturgy. In and through the risen Christ, the Paschal Mystery is continued in the sacraments: 'Christ is always present to his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations' (n. 1088). The Holy Spirit is 'the artisan of God's masterpieces, the sacraments of the new covenant' (n. 1091). God's own beauty and artistry are expressed in a special way in the Church's liturgy.

The *Catechism* discusses the Eucharist under three main Trinitarian headings: as thanksgiving and praise to the Father; as the sacrificial memorial of Christ and of his Body, the Church; as the presence of Christ by the power of his Word and of the Holy Spirit (n. 1358).

Thanksgiving to the Father

'Eucharist' means first of all 'thanksgiving' (n. 1360). It is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father, a sacrament of gratitude in which the Church sings glory to God in the name of all creation (n. 1361).

In the Eucharistic sacrifice the whole of creation loved by God is presented to the Father through the death and resurrection of Christ. Through Christ the Church can offer the sacrifice of praise in thanksgiving for all that God has made good, beautiful and just in creation and in humanity (n. 1359).

Is this dimension of thanksgiving central enough to our own understanding and celebration of the Eucharist? Do we come to the Eucharist consciously united with all creation in praise of the Father, simply to lift up our hearts to God because ‘it is right to give him thanks and praise’?

Sacrificial Memorial of Christ

The *Catechism* echoes the central importance of the concept of ‘memorial’ for biblical, patristic (Church Fathers) and modern Eucharistic theology. A ‘memorial’ involves far more than simply remembering what happened once-upon-a-time:

In the sense of Sacred Scripture the memorial is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men. In the liturgical celebration of these events, they become in a certain way present and real. This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every

time Passover is celebrated the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them (n. 1363).

The Passover is a ritual meal, celebrated as a 'memorial' of the great escape from slavery in Egypt and the entry of God's people into a new friendship, a new covenant with God. The Jewish idea of memorial involves evoking the past in such a way that a past event is made effective and fruitful here and now. The heart of the event itself is made present for us today (n. 1334).

Jesus took the Passover Meal and fulfilled its deepest meaning. He transformed it into the memorial of his own saving death and resurrection. The heart of Jesus' saving work is made present for us here and now: in the Eucharist, Jesus himself is personally present as our crucified and risen Saviour (n. 1340). There we powerfully 'proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). It is Jesus himself who tells us to 'Do this as a memorial of me' (1 Cor 11:24, 25), and when we come to Mass we keep his special commandment of love.

A 'sacrificial' understanding of the Eucharist is the heart of Catholic teaching on the Mass. This is clearly reaffirmed in the *Catechism* in a way which makes full use of the New Testament language of memorial:

The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body (n. 1362).

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present (n. 1364).

'Memorial' is a biblical way of presenting our later idea of 'sacrament'. The liturgical celebration of the Eucharist is the outward, visible sign of the inward, invisible grace of Christ's gift of salvation. The Eucharist is the 'sacrament of salvation'. We call it a sacrifice because 'it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit' (n. 1366). This means that 'the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice' (n. 1367). By taking part in the Eucharist, we participate in Christ's saving sacrifice, his death and resurrection.

This means that the Eucharist is much more than a Communion Service at which the Scriptures are read and Holy Communion is given. In some Catholic churches, a deacon or lay minister leads such a service when there is no priest to preside at a celebration of the Eucharist. Such services are of great value when a priest cannot be

present, but they are not the Mass and are ultimately no substitute for the Mass itself.

An Easter Communion

The Eucharist is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ (nn. 1323, 1330, 1337, 1341). This is an advance on some previous theology which understood the Eucharist as the memorial or sacramental representation only of the death or cross of Christ, rather than of the total mystery of salvation. Each Eucharist is therefore an Eastertidal moment, and there should be a note of 'festive joy' (n. 1334).

The death and resurrection of Christ (or rather, Christ in his death and resurrection) are present for us to share. The active participation of all encouraged by the Second Vatican Council is not primarily about everyone having some special ministry to perform at every Mass, although the *Catechism* does teach that 'all have their own active parts to play in the celebration, each in his own way' (n. 1348). Full participation, however, is something much deeper.

The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism, and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation, participate with the whole

community in the Lord's own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist (n. 1322).

The Church as the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head (n. 1368). In this sense we can call the Eucharist the sacrifice of the Church; united with Christ himself, we come to the Eucharist to be offered, whole and entire, to the Father. True Christian discipleship is not primarily following after Christ, or imitating him, but being 'in Christ', being immersed, plunged or inserted into the saving person and work of Christ himself. It is in the liturgy, above all at our baptism (cf. Rom 6:1-11) and in the Eucharist, that this is made possible.

The Eucharistic Prayers get to the heart of the meaning of the Mass. We ask that Christ 'make us an everlasting gift' to the Father, by uniting us to his own gift of himself (Eucharistic Prayer 3). We become 'a living sacrifice of praise' (Eucharistic Prayer 4), united with Jesus himself in his own worship of the Father. The special Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation and for Children are particularly helpful. The first prayer for Masses with Children gives a neat summary of why we should come to Mass:

We do now what Jesus told us to do.

We remember his death and resurrection

and we offer you, Father, the bread that gives us life
and the cup that saves us.

Jesus brings us to you;

welcome us as you welcome him.

By uniting ourselves with Christ in the Eucharist, as Christ's Body with Christ our Head, we are taken up 'through him, with him, in him' into the heart of the Father: we go where Jesus goes (cf. Jn 14:3), and we ask the Father to 'accept us together with your beloved Son' (Children 3; cf. Reconciliation 2).

The Church's living memory

The *Catechism* makes interesting use of the idea of memory. From the Last Supper to the early and medieval Church, to the Council of Trent and to today, the Eucharist has remained much the same (n. 1345), and the memory of what Jesus did (above all his death and resurrection) is passed on in a living way from then until now. 'The Holy Spirit is the Church's living memory' (n. 1099); it is because the Spirit is present in the Eucharist as the living memory of the Church that the Eucharist can be a memorial in the full sense of the word. The whole Eucharist is very much the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Liturgy of the Word, the Spirit 'recalls' all that God has done for us, awakening the memory of the Church and inspiring thanksgiving and praise (n. 1103).

But the liturgy is more than this: because in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the saving events we recall are ‘actualised’, made powerfully present (n. 1104). Through the sacraments the Holy Spirit makes present the wonders of God: it is above all in the Eucharist that ‘The Spirit makes present and communicates the Father’s work, fulfilled by the beloved Son’ (n. 1155).

New meaning, new value

Although far from adequate on its own as an understanding of God’s transforming work in the Eucharist, the giving of new meaning and value is an important aspect of the Spirit’s work in the celebration. At the Last Supper Jesus ‘gave a new and definitive meaning to the blessing of the bread and the cup’ (n. 1334), and ‘gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning’ (n. 1340). People come to Mass seeking meaning for their lives, and a sense of value and worth for themselves. The Eucharist gives new meaning, and value to God’s creation and to the people: ‘the lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value’ (n. 1368).

In Eucharistic Prayer 2, we ask the Father to make us worthy, but we also thank him ‘for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you’. In the early

Church, standing was the Christian way to pray. To be allowed to stand in God's presence was a sign that God looked on us as his own sons and daughters. Nothing can affirm our dignity and value more strongly than taking part in the Eucharist and hearing what God says to us about ourselves.

The presence of Christ

The risen Christ is truly present in his Church in many ways: in the Scriptures, in the Church's prayer and worship 'where two or three are gathered in my name' (Mt 18:20) and in the poor, the sick and the imprisoned (Mt 25:31–46), in the sacraments and in his ministers. But he is present most especially and in a unique way under the Eucharistic species, the consecrated bread and wine: here in the Blessed Sacrament, 'the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained' (n. 1374).

We believe this simply because Jesus says of the bread and wine: 'This is my body', 'This is my blood' (Mk 14:22–24). The risen Christ continues to say these words today through the ministry of his priests. Jesus himself is our bread of life (Jn 6:48). Take time to reflect prayerfully on the following passages from the New Testament: 1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:17–34; Jn 6:22–69; Lk 24:13–35.

Traditional Catholic theology distinguishes carefully between the 'accidents' or appearances of a thing (what

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