

Believe Celebrate Live **THE EUCHARIST**

Gathering

In this time to *Believe, Celebrate, Live the Eucharist*, we all have an opportunity to reflect on the rich mysteries of our faith, with a focus on our greatest prayer, the Mass. As you might expect, we'll start at the beginning: with the gathering of the assembly, the entrance procession, and the opening song.

Called to Worship

"It's Sunday morning.

You decide to go to Mass. Or rather, God decides for you. God draws each of us out of our solitude and isolation, and makes us into a people that lives by faith and whose unity is Christ," writes Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the recently deceased Archbishop of Paris. "Yes, we should consider it a grace of God to have been 'chosen' to be members of the People of God, 'to serve in his presence,' to be gathered into his Church, the Body of Christ" (Lustiger, *La Messe*, p. 11).

We come to Mass not because we happen to have the time or because we feel like it or because we have to. We come in response to a call. In coming to Mass, Sunday after Sunday, we are letting ourselves be gathered by God.

When God's people are thus gathered together, God's Church is made visible. Many diverse individuals become something altogether new. They become one community entrusted with a task that no one else can accomplish for them: to be the body of Christ in this place, at this time. The whole is truly greater than its parts.



The Entrance

The entrance procession doesn't begin with the entrance hymn! Perhaps you could say it begins when someone arrives to turn on the lights and open the doors. This great procession continues as the faithful arrive from every direction—on foot, by car, by bus, by taxi, by van, maybe even by boat—to greet one another and

take their places in the church. This is the great entrance procession; the vested ministers simply conclude it. The formal entrance is an emblem of what has already begun to happen. We see in it a people ceasing to be a civic or other kind of community, and becoming a liturgical one. But, of course, there is more, because the procession is not just about us. It's about Christ's living presence in our midst. As the cross enters the church, we stand—the simplest possible gesture, and yet a powerful sign of attention and respect. We've already seen that it is the living God who gathers us here, though we may think we arrive under our own steam. The cross leads us, and the solemn, deliberate pace reminds us that the pilgrim people of God have nothing to fear. Their destination is sure and their guide cannot go astray. Candles are signs of a living presence, and the candles carried with the cross remind us that the cross we adore is a living cross, a flowering tree, both alive and life-giving.

The procession points to other signs of Christ as well. Servers carry candles around the Book of the Gospels, because, as the Second Vatican Council teaches us, "Christ himself speaks when the scriptures are

proclaimed in the Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [CSL] #7*). The priest presiding over the celebration is another sign of Christ’s presence. This is perhaps most obvious in the vestments he wears. One fourth-century Christian commentator wrote, “Their outer garb is more sublime than they are”; the priest-presider “does not wear his usual clothing nor does he wear his ordinary outer garment; a vestment of fine, bright linen envelops him” (quoted in Martimort, *Principles of the Liturgy*, p. 189). The vestment is an outward sign of an interior reality, the sacrament by which the priest is enabled to act *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, in the celebration of the Eucharist. The priest is the last to enter, for when he “joins the celebrating community, the Church, the Body of the risen Lord, with its head and its members, is signified in its totality” (Deiss, *The Mass*, p. 17).



together in song, says Cardinal Lustiger, “a communion of prayer and adoration is formed between men and women until then separated and often strangers to one another. Together, with one heart, they begin to sing to God, the same acclamation or supplication” (Lustiger, p. 31). Some of us sing with trained beauty—most of us sing with natural beauty—but at Mass, we all sing. As the great Methodist preacher and composer John Wesley said in his “Directions for Singing” (1761), “Sing . . . let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If singing

is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing. Sing lustily and with a good courage” (Preface to *Sacred Melody*). Wesley knew that those who have sung and prayed together are no longer strangers: they have begun to experience their oneness in Christ. St. Augustine felt the same way. “How I wept,” he wrote, “deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face—tears that did me good” (*Confessions*, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1157).

Powerful Songs

The song that accompanies the entrance of the ministers is an essential part of the gathering of the people of God. It doesn’t simply set the mood or explain the theme of the day (though it can do both of these); it accomplishes something. The song is the first activity of the community gathered in Christ, who is present when the Church prays and sings (*CSL* #7). Communal singing sounds like unity, and it helps to bring it about as well. As the people join

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What brings you to Mass Sunday after Sunday? Where and when does your “procession” begin? What do you look forward to at Sunday Mass?
- Can you think of a time when a particular hymn or song has moved you deeply or spoken to you in a special way?
- Describe a celebration of Mass that fully engaged you. What was different about it?
- Do you feel connected as one in Christ with your community? If you do, what is it that helps you feel connected? If not, what’s missing? Can you think of a time when you truly experienced Christ’s presence in the community around you?
- What expectations do you bring to the Mass? What does the Mass expect of you?