

An Explanation of the Mass

Introduction



You will be amazed when you discover
what is happening, what it means,
and what it can mean for you.

Worship will never be the same.

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About Us

Good Shepherd Anglican Church is a life-changing fellowship of men, women, and children who share their experience, strength and faith with each other that they may solve their common problem [Romans 7:21-24] and help others to recover from chronic sin and addiction. Our primary purpose is to love God and to help others come to know the love of God through Jesus Christ, by obeying his commandments [Matt 22:37-38; John 15:13] and by practicing his way of life in all our relationships [Matthew 5-7; Ephesians 4-6; James; 1 Corinthians 13].

Our Common Problem (—and Solution)

(an excerpt from Paul's letter to the Romans, Ch. 7)

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do. I know that nothing good lives in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do —this I keep on doing.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, thank God!

“An Explanation of the Mass”

by Fr. Michael Nee

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AN EXPLANATION OF THE MASS: INTRODUCTION

The Mass is a remarkable, amazing, and unique thing. I can't possibly explain it all, but I hope to explain enough of it to give you a better idea of what is happening, what it means, and what it can mean for you. My intended audience is primarily people who have had experience with the Mass, or at least know something about it and/or Christian worship generally. Some familiarity with the Bible is assumed as well. That said, I hope that any reader, regardless of background, will find this interesting and informative. More than anything else what I hope the Christian reader will get out of this is an increase in mindfulness and a deepening of his experience of God during, and as a result of, worship.

Before I get into a line-by-line explanation of the Mass (see **Endnote**), I want to provide an overview, what they call in film “an establishing shot.” No one view quite does justice to the Mass. So, I am going to provide several snapshots of the Mass from different angles to establish what we are looking at. I take my inspiration from Jesus. In Matthew, chapter 13, he provides one view after another (in eight parables) to explain “the kingdom” to his listeners. “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”; “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”; etc. So then, I offer “The Mass is ...”; “The Mass is ...”; etc. Gather all these snapshots and together they will give you the big picture. You might find some of them surprising even though you have been attending Mass your entire life. Enjoy.

The Mass is Christian

Most evangelicals have—wrongly, I think—abandoned the Mass. They tend to think of the Mass as Roman Catholic. Too bad. Besides Roman Catholics, Anglicans (the largest Protestant denomination in the world), Eastern Orthodox, Copts, Lutherans, among others—that is, *the majority of Christians worldwide*—all maintain the Mass (the Eucharistic service, the Divine Liturgy, ...) as their principal service.

The Mass is Jewish

In everything from form and content to action and intent, the Mass reflects Jewish practices at home, in the synagogue, and in the temple. The opening procession, the Old Testament, the Lord's table/altar, processing the Gospel, lighting the candles, burning incense, delivering homilies, recitation of scripture, singing praise songs, lifting up the elements of bread and wine, ceremonial hand washing, collecting offerings, repenting of sin, ... Annotating it all would constitute a book in and of itself, that's how Jewish the Mass is. See these two verses from Psalm 26 alone (my italics): “I will *wash my hands* in innocence, O LORD, that I may go in *procession* round your *altar*, *singing aloud a song of thanksgiving* and *recounting all your wonderful deeds*.”

The Mass is Ancient

There are elements of the Mass that harken back to Melchizedek and earlier, that

is, before the Law, before the Abrahamic or Sinaitic covenants. The Mass provides for the universal desire in the deepest part of the human soul, to respond to God in a way that is meaningful and sacred. Sinful though they are, all people hunger for conscious contact with God and for sacredness. The Mass appeals to that and satisfies.

The Mass is Contemporary

Robert Webber in *Ancient Future Faith* made the point that postmodernism has shifted to language that values the poetic instead of the prosaic, the visual over the verbal, the symbol over the manifesto. The Mass excels in all these ways. It uses them all. And this is not just a bow to contemporary culture, which is here today and gone tomorrow. This is how the ancient church worshiped. Indeed, it is only right biblically that worship should communicate in all these ways since that is how God communicates Himself to us, isn't it? The signs (John 3:2) of Christ as well as his words, the stars in the heaven *and* the letters of Paul, the songs (psalms) *and* the chronicles, "signs and portents" as well as verbal prophecy ... The Mass is a response to God in all these languages because God first communicated to us in all these ways. (See **The Mass is total engagement** below.)

The Mass is Art

When you consider not only the script (one might even call it a libretto), the vestments, the "props," the church that has been built to house it, the decorations: paintings, sculpture, furniture, glass, etc., the music and singing, et alia—you begin to see the Mass as possibly the greatest example of *gesamtkunstwerk* the world has ever seen. A *gesamtkunstwerk* is a work of art that makes use of all or many art forms to create a unified whole. Now that I've mentioned it, can you see that in the Mass?

Besides the many art forms used, we also need to consider the creators and the artists who use those forms. The Mass is the creative work of God, first and foremost, and of many believers, many artists, many writers, many performers, many patrons over thousands of years. And it is a living piece of art, not a museum piece, in that it requires the ongoing participation of believers, who continue to shape the work from generation to generation and, really, when you think about it, from one Mass to the next. It is always the same and yet always different. What an amazingly durable yet ever-changing work it is.

Why do I make this point about the Mass being art? Because it is necessary to recognize art as art in order to appreciate it. You don't approach a poem the way you would a news report. You put on a different head-set for the one as opposed to the other. You need to get on the art headset for the Mass. Art speaks symbolically, always referring to a reality beyond itself, always looking to enhance or expand consciousness, typically communicating at a level beyond the merely conscious. That means we should look for that and be open to receiving it. Dante's *Divine*

Comedy is a treasure house of references to everything from Homer to Aquinas, from the creation of the world to the worldly machinations of Medieval Italian politics, and all points in between. So, too, is the Mass embedded with all kinds of references and allusions for us to ponder. One gesture, one phrase may contain layers of meaning. The Mass is at one and the same time explicit and implicit, exoteric and esoteric, personal and communal, private and public, ambiguous and unambiguous. It really is all that and more.

Finally, a poetry teacher once told me that whereas prose tells you what beer is, poetry gives you the sense of having tasted it. Art is meant to be experienced and it means to change you. The experience of the Mass is *designed* to change you (see below). Great art succeeds at that, doesn't it? Unlike most works of art, in order to experience the Mass you must become an actor within it. Everyone in attendance at the Mass is a co-creator of the event. Even when you are just sitting and listening you are fulfilling a role, you are actively engaged. That is essential to the success of the Mass. Everyone has lines to say, songs to sing, actions and a dance to perform. One must be aware of that and yet, I'm sorry to say, the great majority of the faithful who attend Mass bring little or no consciousness to that. No wonder it can seem so flat. Imagine a production of *Hamlet*, arguably the greatest play ever written, performed by a cast that arrived late, mumbled and droned its lines, and occasionally neglected to say them altogether. Great a work of art as the Mass is, it remains dependent on its participants to succeed. By the way, now that you know that everyone at Mass is part of the creative team and "the cast," so to speak, have you figured out who the audience is?

The Mass is sacred

Although there are aspects of the Mass that change to remain relevant to the people celebrating it, there is an aspect of the Mass that requires humble stewardship. The Mass is a sacred inheritance that has been given to us, not only for our benefit, but as a sacred charge and responsibility. It is not entirely ours to do with as we please. It is ours for a time and it will belong to others after we are gone. It's bigger than we are and we need always to remember that.

The Mass is mystery

"Let us proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." (Eucharistic prayer)

The following are excerpts from *The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church* by Rev. Alciviadis C. Calivas, Th.D. His remarks are instructive and profitable for all Christians.

The Orthodox Church uses the Greek word *μυστήριον* (*mysterion*), instead of *sacrament*, to denote the divinely instituted rites which manifest and communicate sanctifying divine grace. The word *μυστήριον* essentially

means anything hidden or incomprehensible. It has been applied by the Church to the essential beliefs and doctrines of the faith and appears several times in Holy Scripture; its chief meaning is linked to the hidden and secret will of God related to the salvation of the world, now manifest in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word (Logos). "And since the Church is to proclaim that mystery and communicate it to the people, the essential acts by which she is accomplishing this are also called mysteries. Through all these acts we are made participants and beneficiaries of the great mystery of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ" (Rev. Al. Schmemmann).

We celebrate, in joy and thanksgiving, the whole mystery of the divine economy from creation to incarnation, especially "the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand of the Father and the second glorious coming." Thus, in experiencing the reigning Christ in the Divine Liturgy, the past, present, and future of the history of salvation are lived as one reality in the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

See what I mean about getting on the right headset?

The Mass is life-changing

We speak often enough of the Rite of the Mass, but what is a rite? I found this description in *Wikipedia*, of all places. It's spot-on as far as I'm concerned. "A Christian rite in this sense comprises the manner of performing all services for the worship of God and the sanctification of men." That second part is very important. In the course of the Mass we become sanctified. "Sanctify" means to set apart as or declare holy; consecrate; make legitimate or binding by religious sanction; free from sin; purify.

The Liturgy of the Word, the first part of the Mass, rehearses the Rite of Passage for each of us individually and for all of us collectively, whereby we are transformed from sinner to saint, taking us from life here on earth to life in heaven. Every time we attend Mass we get to go to heaven and join in the Lamb's Feast as described in Revelation. That is what happens in the second half of the Mass, from the Offertory on.

This Rite of Passage is both effectual—it really does change and prepare us for heaven—as well as commemorative, as it summarizes our ongoing spiritual life, and our relationship to God, to one another and to the world.

In it [the Eucharist], the Church is continuously changed from a human community into the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and the People of God. ... The Eucharist initiates humankind, nature, and time into the mystery of the uncreated Trinity. The Divine Liturgy is not simply a sacred

drama or a mere representation of past events. It constitutes the very presence of God's embracing love, which purifies, enlightens, perfects, ... all "those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). (Rev. Calivas, *The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church*)

In the course of the Mass, we admit our sinfulness, affirm our faith, our dependence on God, our willingness to repent and to forgive, our hope for the future—it's all there.

Where does this Rite of Passage start? In one sense, it starts before it starts. It begins offstage, before the curtain goes up, as it were. The initiating action is, simply, making a decision to go to church. By doing that you are turning away from the world—rejecting the world—and turning, instead, to Christ by joining the body of Christ, to be in his kingdom. That is the classic meaning of "repent," changing your mind, to turn from one thing to another. Every time you go to church you commemorate your repentance. And repentance is what we have to do every day of our lives. Reject the world's ways and embrace the way of Christ.

This personal action is underscored corporately by the formation of the processional outside the church building. That may seem a matter of mere convenience, but it carries a symbolic meaning. You see, our journey begins outside the Church, in the world. All of us existed first as part of the world and needed to be brought into the Church—the body of Christ. Gathering, in and of itself, holds deep meaning. If I could, I would have everyone assemble for Mass outside the church building and all participate in the processional.

And what do we assemble around/behind? What is always at the very front? The cross. That is what leads, that is what we follow—the cross of Christ, with all that that symbolizes, including Christ himself as well as his atoning sacrifice. We follow it out of the world and into the body of Christ here on earth—the Church, literally and figuratively—and from there into heaven. This simple processional action foretells what we will be doing in the Mass itself. We are going to rehearse our journey from the world to heaven, from a life apart from God to one where we, led by Christ and through Christ, share his very flesh and blood. How amazing is that! How wonderful! How humbling! What Godly mystery!

The typical/classic church building provides the perfect setting for this sacramental action to be played out. When you come into the church, what do you see? What is center stage, even before the Mass proper begins? The Altar, also called the Lord's Table. That is where we are headed as individuals and as the Church—we are on our way to the Lamb's Feast. That is what this whole event is going to be about. A directing teacher of mine once said that the audience needs to know in the first two minutes what the play is about; otherwise they won't know how to respond to it. Is it a comedy or a tragedy, is it parodic or sincere, poetic realism or docu-drama? The

Mass delivers in this way. The procession and the altar tell you exactly what this whole experience is going to be about. This is your life journey unfolding before you.

In AA they say, “Keep the memory green,” that is, don’t forget where you came from. The setting of the traditional church does just this. You come from the world into the church, symbolizing the kingdom of God on earth, the Body of Christ, and the first thing of consequence you encounter is a baptismal font or the symbolic equivalent of one, where you dip your fingers and bless yourself with holy water. In so doing, you reaffirm your baptismal covenant. Baptism is where your rite of passage as a Christian begins and that is where this ritualistic retelling of the ongoing life of a Christian begins. Following? At the beginning of the nave (the center aisle)—baptism, at the end—heaven. A spare, elegant, solemn statement without a word being spoken.

Heaven is symbolized by the chancel, the part of the church building that contains the altar, sanctuary, and choir, traditionally separated from the nave and transepts by a railing (Latin: *cancellus*). That is heaven on the other side of the railing. There are several steps up to the altar in the traditional church, aren’t there? Not unlike the bema in the synagogue. Up there, heaven (get it?) the place where the Lamb’s Feast—at the altar/the Lord’s table— is celebrated. The people up there are dressed differently, in the white robes of the martyrs in heaven, get it? (Revelation 6:11) Or, are they the white robes of the baptized? Or, does it represent the white seamless garment that Jesus wore at the time of the Passion, and therefore symbolic of the clothing of Christ that we must put on in order to enter heaven? Or, all of these? (Anglican answer—as always: “all of these.” I’m only half-kidding.)

The Mass is action

One of the great distinctions of the Mass as opposed to other worship services is the ongoing symbolic—and efficacious—enacting of what we believe and what we do (and all of it inspired by the Word of God): making the sign of the cross, genuflecting, kneeling, standing, processing the Gospel, carrying the candles (torches), coming to the altar for Holy Communion, etc. We walk the walk.

It is not only what we ourselves do, we also witness actions in the course of the Mass, actions that carry profound statements of our faith and our heritage. For example: the processing of the Gospel from the altar to the congregation and back; and the veiled chalice and paten on the altar—which are in due course unveiled and put into action (I’ll explain both of these later).

A theatre director I once knew said that his ideal was a production that would be equally enjoyable for someone who was completely deaf as it would be for someone who was completely blind. As a result, in the final week of rehearsals he would have a run-through of the play from beginning to end without a word being spoken. Imagine the Mass that way—without words. Imagine it in an appropriate setting,

performed conscientiously and reverently by everyone involved. That in and of itself would have tremendous power and would communicate the Mass. It also makes an important point about the practice of the faith. “Faith without works is dead.” In the Mass, we act our faith, we don’t just speak, think, or sing it. We “walk in faith.” All those physical gestures are a kind of sign language. In the Mass, remembering what Paul said in Romans 12:1, we worship God with our bodies (see below). We are not passive, we are *responsive*. That’s a most important word and it says a great deal to those who understand it. *The whole life of the believer is one great response to God’s loving actions.* Drop your nets and follow me. Drink the cup that I drink, eat what I eat. Pick up your cross as I have picked up my cross. This is not a sit on your duff faith. It demands action, and the action of the Mass embodies it.

Finally, we do these things corporately. So there is a sense that we are united not only in our words and beliefs, but in what we do, that is, our faith in action. And nothing binds a people like common action.

The Mass is total engagement

Liturgical worship engages one completely—not just mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, but bodily as well. This reflects the Biblical ideal to worship and love God totally (Deut. 6:5; Romans 12:1-2) and to recognize the holiness of the entire created order (Gen. 1:31). Therefore, *all the senses are engaged in worship*. Sight: pictures, sculpture, vestments, liturgical colors, vessels, linens, and candlestick holders. Sound: singing, music, bells, the spoken word. Touch: embracing each other at the peace, receiving communion, sometimes being anointed with oil, sprinkled with water, laying on and joining of hands in prayer. Smell: incense, wine, candles. Taste: bread, wine.

Then, there are the aforementioned gestures—physical actions: standing, processing, sitting quietly, bowing one’s head, hand gestures, kneeling. They have meaning not only outwardly as a sign of reverence, contrition, etc. Their practice also affects one inwardly. Meyerhold, the great Russian theatre visionary, argued that one could call forth emotions in performance through the use of movements, gestures, and expressions that not only embody the feeling, but actually engender it. Hold the pose of grief, anxiety, anger, etc., and you will begin to feel it. Where Stanislavsky’s method worked from the inside out, Meyerhold’s approach worked from the outside in.

There is wisdom in this I think. The positions and gestures during the Mass not only express, they also inspire—especially kneeling—at least I find it so. The Roman Catholic writer Baron Von Hügel said, “I kiss my son not only because I love him, but also so that I may love him.” Each physical action in the Mass changes us and declares our relationship to God and to one another in different ways at different times throughout the Mass. Sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, the Mass seamlessly integrates our mind, body and spirit in worship, each one complementing

and enhancing the other. How could a Christian not want this kind of worship experience? I hunger for it even as I write about it.

The Mass is Scripture

Notice I did not write “The Mass is scriptural.” I wrote “The Mass is Scripture.”

In the beginning, prayers were straightforward: people turned to God and asked for help. By the closing centuries of the biblical period, however, a change became observable. Prayers now began to include references to Scripture—allusions to biblical stories in which God had answered a prayer, or the evocation of specific biblical passages, or the recycling of biblical phrases in the creation of a new prayer. This process, the “Scripturalization of prayer,” grew in intensity and refinement as Judaism moved from the biblical period to early post-biblical times. It is attested throughout the prayers found in the biblical apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and early piyyut, and it continued apace in the liturgical compositions of the Geonic period and still later times. (*Prayers That Cite Scripture*, ed. James Kugel)

What you see in the Mass is a continuation of this tradition. Some criticize the liturgical rites. They see the Mass as the human invention of a highly suspect medieval Roman Church. In fact, the Mass we celebrate is the worship we have received from the church of the apostles. Other critics of the Mass see the prayers and responses as merely a script performed by rote. What they don’t realize is that *by using the words of the Mass we are submitting our own wills to that of God. We pray to God in a way that God Himself tells us is pleasing to Him—because we use the words He Himself has revealed to us in his Holy Word.* From Genesis to Revelation, God makes it known how he wants to be worshiped—outwardly and inwardly. Jesus and the apostles tell us how to pray and even what to say.

Everything in the Mass quotes, paraphrases, or is instructed by, Scripture. As Paul tells Timothy that all of Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), so one might say that all of the Mass is, likewise, God-breathed. To participate in the Mass is to be utterly enveloped by Scripture and infused with His Spirit. When you participate in the Mass you can no more escape Scripture than a fish in the ocean could escape water. If you’re an evangelical, it’s like a dream come true. You’re like a kid in a magical candy factory where not only are there candies all around, but everything you touch or walk upon is made of candy. You cannot move in the Mass without encountering Scripture and, therefore, without encountering His Holy Spirit. The sense of the Mass is: all God, all the time.

The reason Scripture is omnipresent is because we recognize it as God’s Word. We want the Mass (and our lives) to be all about God, not about us. (If you didn’t figure it out earlier—the “audience” is God.) The Mass is an act of love on our part, to please

God. It's all for Him and all about Him. By using His language infused with His ideas, we hope to transcend our own ideas. We want to go higher. We want to get to a greater level of conscious contact with the God we love because He first loved us. We want to get closer to Him. God tells us in Isaiah 55:8 *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.* Using God's language is one way in which we practice letting go of our thoughts and our ways in order to enter God's thoughts and to practice His ways. In that humble submission, of course, we experience one of the great, seemingly paradoxical, spiritual truths. In servanthood to God, we find freedom. As slaves to Christ, we become co-heirs of the Kingdom.

The Mass is praise and thanksgiving

What motivates this desire of ours to please God? This is fundamental to participating in the Mass. The Mass is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We are supposed to be motivated by God's grace. The word *eucharist* is from the Greek εὐχαριστία which means *thankfulness* or *the giving of thanks*. The center of the word is χάρις, which we transliterate as *charis* (from which we get *charity*), which means *grace*. Amazing, no? At the center of thanksgiving, literally and figuratively and truly, is grace—God's grace. The root of our thanksgiving is God's grace. Can I get a witness?

Our awareness of His mercy, love and grace poured out upon us who deserve not a bit of it, and our appreciation of the new life He has made us a part of, are the motivating factors for our entire lives and for worship in particular. *If you don't get this, you don't get the Mass.* The feeling of anticipation of worship should be that of one who can hardly contain himself, so grateful is he, so desirous is he to get in and give praise and thanksgiving to this wonderful God. I think of Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA, and his simple words, "The Lord has been so wonderful to me, curing me of this terrible disease that I just want to keep telling people about it."

This overwhelming gratitude we feel is for one in particular—our Heavenly Father. We come to Him as children. This is very important because it gives us the right attitude. Some people bridle at the repetition they see in the Mass. Every week we recite out loud the Nicene Creed or the Apostle's Creed, the Our Father, etc. But, if you think of how a child proudly recites the lessons taught by his or her delighted father, you will begin to get the idea that is behind certain parts of the Mass in particular. We know from Scripture that God wants us to study His word, to learn from Him who He is, who we are, remember what Jesus has told us, what the Holy Spirit has convicted us of, etc. In keeping holy the Sabbath (attending Sunday Mass) and reciting our lessons, we are children making an offering to our Father that we know pleases Him deeply—and that pleases us deeply. Remember the delight a child derives from being able to please his or her father: to make your father so proud you hear him telling his friends what you have done, to touch his heart with so much love for you that he gets teary-eyed, to do or say something so funny that he

can't stop laughing. A child feels power in that, a good and wholesome and sacred power. We feel that power with our Father during the Mass when we praise Him and give thanks with the right attitude.

Finally, the Mass is worship in spirit and in truth

John 4:24 *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.* The following commentary is from *John* by Rodney A. Whitacre.

This new worship is characterized by spirit and truth (*pneuma kai aletheia*, 4:23). Like most of the key terms in this conversation, these words function on more than one level. On one level to worship in spirit could mean to worship not just with words or thoughts or mere emotion but with one's innermost self, at one's center, one's heart. Such worship engages the mind, emotions and body, but it is centered deeper, in the spirit. And to worship in truth could mean to worship as who one really is, with no hypocrisy, falseness, deception. Such a reference to the human spirit and integrity develops thoughts already introduced in the Gospel (for example, 1:47; 3:6).

But even on this earthly level the reference is not merely to human qualities, for one must be born from above (3:3-8). To worship in spirit and truth means to worship as one who is spiritually alive, living in the new reality Jesus offers, referred to here as the gift of God, which is living water. For behind the earthly things are the heavenly things, that is, God himself (cf. 3:12). Worshiping in spirit is connected to the fact that God is spirit (4:24). And worshiping in truth is connected with Jesus, the Messiah who explains everything (4:25-26). This picture of Jesus will be developed more when it is said that his words are spirit and truth (6:63) and he is himself the truth (14:6). So worshiping in spirit and truth is related to the very character of God and the identity of Christ. It is to worship in union with the Father, who is spirit, and according to the revelation of the Son, who is the truth. Indeed, it is to be taken into union with God through the Spirit (chaps. 14 - 17).

This is why it is called "Holy Communion." By means of the Mass, we, gathered into and forming the Body of Christ, enter into Holy Communion with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Wow.

Endnote

Want to go deeper?

See our other booklets:

An Explanation of the Mass: Part One

An Explanation of the Mass: Part Two