

A SCHOOL'S GUIDE TO THE MASS

WHAT IS IT?

The Mass is the memorial of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

The celebration of Mass, an action of Christ and his people, is the centre of the whole of Christian life for the Church, and for each individual Christian.

In 300 AD the Emperor Diocletian banned Christians, on pain of death, from the celebration of Mass. When forty-nine people were arrested for doing just that, one man, called Emeritus, replied 'Without the Lord's Day, we cannot live'. They were all executed for refusing to stop - for them, celebrating Mass on Sunday meant more even than their lives.

The very first Christians took Sunday, the day that Jesus rose from the dead, as the day on which they assembled, prayed, read the Scriptures and broke bread, just as they had done with him at the Last Supper. They looked on it as a sacred duty and, to this day, that celebration, which we call the Eucharist, has continued. The Eucharist, or Mass, the memorial of the saving death and resurrection of Christ, is central to the life of a Catholic. It is not simply a re-enactment of the Last Supper, rather it is an encounter with the person of the Risen Christ.

THE MASS IS GIVEN TO US

The Mass is a central part of the Tradition of the Church. Instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, it is handed down by the Church from generation to generation. The Mass is a given. Our task is to learn to celebrate it faithfully and well, so that it might be fruitful in our lives.

BY THE WHOLE CHURCH

The Mass is for the whole assembly to celebrate. A celebration of Mass should always be prepared so that it will lead those taking part to conscious, full and active participation. Participation that fosters the virtues of faith, hope and charity is what is expected because of what we celebrate but also because, through our baptism, we all share in the priesthood of Christ.

One implication of this is that in the worship of the Church, priests and other ministers, such as deacons and altar servers, don't celebrate the Mass for us, we do it together. They have their vital role and, without an ordained priest, we cannot celebrate the Mass. But each one present has a role to play, and principal amongst the roles of the priest and other ministers is to help all present to fulfil that role.

CELEBRATE WELL

The work of celebration needs constant support so that all of those taking part - priest, other ministers and all present - are helped to know what they are to do and how to do it. Attention to the internals of participation (such as prayerful preparation) are at least as important as attention to the externals (such as spoken responses).

WHAT IS GIVEN TO US?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

It is a simple and dynamic structure:

- gathering and introductory rites;
- liturgy of the Word;
- liturgy of the Eucharist;
- blessing and dismissal/going forth.

If we work with the structure it will help our celebration. If we work against it, the nature of the Mass as ritual is compromised.

THE PRAYERS AND READINGS OF THE MASS

These are found in the Lectionary and the Missal. Texts for each day of the year and texts for special occasions are provided. We are invited to make appropriate selection, from the options available, such as for a votive Mass for Our Lady during May or for the Sacred Heart during June - but always in consultation with the priest.

The Catholic tradition is a liturgical tradition, where given prayers and readings matter. When the prayers and readings are not easy to understand on first encounter - and for children that will probably mean most of our readings and prayers - those responsible for Catholic education and for worship need to help the pupils and students understand them, and to do this especially before the celebration itself.

THE SYMBOLS OF THE MASS

The Mass is God communicating with us through sacrament (a symbol that signifies what it effects). If sacraments don't signify, their ability to effect, or to 'work', is greatly compromised.

Gathering, Listening and Responding, Giving Thanks, Eating and Drinking and Leaving the Eucharist to live as Christ are not simply things we go through the motions of doing. They need to be purposeful and significant. Again, this needs to be learnt by everyone taking part if, together, we are to do what is necessary.

PREPARING FOR MASS

This is not difficult to do but, like everything else, it does require particular skills. It is very helpful for the person with overall responsibility for the Mass to become:

- familiar with the Missal;
- familiar with the Lectionary;
- familiar with the priorities and principles regarding music at Mass;
- familiar with the Church's expectations of readers, servers, and other ministries.

You do not have to be **the** expert on all of these things. Normally you should expect your role to be more of a coordinating role, as you draw on the expertise of others (who may, for example, select music, train readers, write the texts for the Prayer of the Faithful).

But you, working alongside the priest, are the person who has been given responsibility for ensuring the suitability and quality of the celebration. So you need to have an understanding of the basics.

Indeed, sometimes you will have to 'train the experts' as, for example, simply because someone is a skilled musician doesn't necessarily mean they have an understanding of the expectations of music at Mass.

The various sheets in this booklet remind us of the basics and we include a Liturgy Planner to enable you to ensure that you have everything covered.

To take things further, once you have the basics in place, secondary schools might have a look at *Celebrating the Mass*. Primary schools might look at the *Directory for Masses with Children*, which offers possible adaptation with younger children.