

HOMILY ON THE MASS

**A series of five homilies, by Father Michael W. Burke,
based on “In Communion with Christ” (by the Liturgy Office of the
Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales) given over the
weekends of the 15 January, 22 January, 29 January, 5 February and
12 February 2006 in Sacred Heart, Morryston, Swansea.**

15 January 2006

“Introduction” and “Gathering”

Introduction to the Mass

Sunday after Sunday, year after year, Catholics have come together to celebrate the Mass. This weekly gathering of the community is a hallmark of the Church. From the earliest days of Christianity, the coming together on the Lord’s Day has characterised the followers of Christ. We assemble for common prayer, to hear the scriptures proclaimed and explained, and to share in the eucharist. This tradition of marking the Lord’s Day with common prayer is an essential part of our lives as a community of God’s people. And it is the duty of all Christians, by reason of their baptism, to celebrate the Eucharist to the best of their abilities. This means that we are no longer passive attenders at Mass, people who may be physically present but not really participating – we are part of a worshipping community, active participants in the greatest gift given to us. The Mass deepens our union with God and our love for our sisters and brothers in Christ as we continue our earthly pilgrimage to our heavenly home. The Mass makes us what we are, and helps us to become what we are called to be – for at its heart is the real presence of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord, continuing and making available his saving work among us.

In recent times, however, it would appear that we need to be re-educated as to what goes on at Mass, and why. Last year I gave a series of three homilies on the Mass, but our Bishop has asked all parishes to look at the Mass. In other parishes this has been done on the first Sunday of the month since October, but we in the parish of Sacred Heart, Morryston, will do a crash course on the Sundays of Ordinary time, until we start the season of Lent. Once again we will see how the Mass is put together; Why do we do the things we do? Why do we do them at the time we do them? How can we pray more deeply with others?

The word Mass is actually taken from the last phrase used by the priest in the Latin Mass – “Ite, Missa est”, which we translate as “Go, the Mass is ended”, but is best translated as “Go. The dismissal is given.” Sometimes, therefore, we refer to the Eucharist, which reflects more than just the last phrase. The Mass, of course, has its origins in the meal celebrated by Jesus with his apostles at the Last Supper, but also

incorporated various ritual elements from Jewish and other cultural practices. The Mass has developed down through the centuries, and has borrowed from local traditions and additions. During the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's, a reform of the structure of the Mass took place, the most noticeable elements being Mass celebrated in the language spoken by the locals, rather than in Latin, the priest facing the people, and the people themselves doing a lot more – not just praying the rosary quietly in the pews, but being made to feel a part of what was going on. Since then, there have been several other developments, the latest of which is given in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* in 2002. Some of the changes are quite subtle, whereas others are more obvious. We will learn of these changes together.

Over the next five weeks we will look at the parts of the Mass, which coincide with handouts prepared by the Liturgy Office of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales – Introduction, Gathering, Word, Thanksgiving, Communion and Mission. Today, we will have a bit of a marathon and will combine the first two handouts and look at the Introduction and Gathering. The homily over the next few weeks will be shorter!

The Introductory Rites

The purpose of the Introductory Rites is to help us to become a community, one in mind and heart – in other words they are meant to help us become Church. We never come to Mass expecting just to sit down and immediately hear the scriptures. As we enter church our hand reaches out to the font or holy water stoup to touch the holy water with our fingers and bless ourselves. At our baptism we were baptised with water and in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Blessing ourselves as we enter church recalls our first entry into the Church when we became members of Christ's body here on earth. As we gather, the visible presence of Christ's body grows as more and more people come into the Church. And of course, in the Mass we are also conscious that it is not only those visibly present who are celebrating – the whole Church, on earth and in heaven comes together.

We first of all gather as God's family. But before we can pray together, we need to be together. We cannot simply come to Mass as separate individuals, for the Mass is meant to unite us into one. If we are doing our "own thing", then we can really "do our own thing" anywhere, since we are not allowing the liturgy to do its work in uniting us into one family. That is why our welcome of each other is so important. It is not a case that we are welcomed to make us feel good, though that should also be the case – we are welcomed so that we are no longer strangers, a collection of individuals with nothing in common. And so we are greeted at the door, sometimes by name, and made to feel welcome and part of the community. Those who greet us will also take care of us if we are unwell during Mass, or need a drink of water (and for those who do not know, the water fountain is in the back room!) In other words,

we take care of each other. We are then greeted by the Church environment – sometimes highly decorated, other times almost bare. Christian public prayer addresses all our senses. It speaks to the whole person. And as we move through the Mass our common actions together – standing, kneeling, sitting and so on – become powerful signs of our unity.

The different presences of Christ are beautifully illustrated throughout the Mass. His first presence is “where two or three are gathered in my name.” In other words, Christ is present once people start to come together in preparation for Mass. Because of this reason, it is only right that an atmosphere of prayer be kept in the church. If you need to greet someone, please do so, but keep what I call the “idle chatter” – something that is not immediately important – until outside, after Mass. The timing of Mass can be problematic, I know, but where possible, we start on time. If most people can make the effort to arrive in good time for the start of Mass, I would urge the persistent late-comers to do their best to arrive in time too, so that the flow of the Mass is not interrupted by people coming in late. But if you are late, then please come into the church directly – don’t wait in the porch, where you actually become more of a distraction, and by doing so block one of our fire exits!

The other point I want to consider at this time is children. Children are part of the worshipping community from the moment of their baptism, and so they should be brought to Mass, not left at home. Most people present have been through the experience of parenthood, and know what it is to bring sometimes unruly children to Mass. But be strong, take courage, and be persistent. I do not mind the different forms of prayer that children may use – even if others call it noise! If you must bring some toys to calm them down, might I suggest quiet, soft toys or even children’s books with plenty of pictures. A noisy toy, especially when banged on the bench, does distract people from the Mass. And my pet hate – keys – try to refrain giving a baby or young child keys to play with – they can be heard above everything else! If your child persistently cries and is obviously distressed, please feel free to walk around the porch with them.

After the people have gathered, the celebration typically begins with those assembled joining in song to express their unity. This action of singing is usually the first part of the opening rites and a key moment that helps transform a group of unrelated individuals into the gathered body of Christ. Nothing gels a gathering people together into a unified body better than singing. So don’t leave it to others – make sure you have a hymn book, and give singing a go! The introductory rites also usually include the entrance procession, sometimes very simple, at other times very festive. Then follows the veneration and sometimes the incensation of the altar, the visible symbol of Christ, the cornerstone and spiritual rock of his Church. It is also a symbol of the Christ who is present in his members. Mass continues with the sign of the cross, the reminder that we are a people baptised in the name of God the Father,

Son and Holy Spirit, and then there is an initial formal greeting between the presiding priest and the rest of the assembly.

Then we have an act of penitence or the sprinkling with blessed water, though this does not include the prayer of absolution as the “old Mass” used to – the prayer that used to have the sign of the cross “May the Almighty and merciful Lord, grant us pardon, absolution etc.” (which we only had for three years). It is also worthwhile remembering that venial sins may be forgiven during the act of penitence, but major, more serious sins need to be confessed one-to-one to a priest as frequently and as often as necessary. Being away from Mass for some time through our own fault means that we must go to confession first. Remember, the sacrament of confession is not optional! Returning to the introductory rites, on some days we have the *Gloria*, and they always conclude with the first major presidential prayer, the collect or opening prayer.

After the procession and the veneration of the altar, the presiding priest goes to the presidential chair. At this point, the priest himself acts in the person of Christ, and when he speaks it is as if Christ speaks. But, as we will see next week, the presence of Christ will be emphasised elsewhere – on the table of the Word, and on the table of the Altar.

22 January 2006

“Word”

Last week we started our five week venture on the Mass, based on the handouts of the Liturgy Office of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. We looked at the Introduction and Gathering Rites – those parts of the Mass that bring us together as one community, where we are no longer individuals, no longer strangers. Today we will look at the Liturgy of the Word, when God speaks to us of love, of the utter goodness of creation, of the marvellous life yet to come. This is the part of the Mass in which the lectionary, the book from which we take the readings, unfolds for us the mystery of God’s love according to a pattern of feasts and seasons.

The Liturgy of the Word

After coming together as one family in Christ and acknowledging our need for God’s merciful love, the assembly now shifts its focus to a different part of the church – the ambo or the “table” of God’s Word. God wants to speak to us. He wants to speak to us about his love for us, about what he has done for us, and what he will do for us out of love. God wants to speak to us about what it means to be God. God wants to open up to us the mystery of redemption and salvation, offering us our spiritual nourishment. Simply stated, the Liturgy of the Word is the Church’s special moment to hear God speaking to us through the scriptures.

From the earliest days, the Christian community has always recognised that it is essential that its members be nourished at both the table of the Word and at the table of the Eucharist. Our task is to listen to God speaking, by attending to this Word and being attentive to what is being said. We often find it hard to listen, but the structure provides us with a pattern for truly listening and responding to the God who speaks. First of all God speaks through the reading, then we respond through the Psalm. Again God speaks through the Gospel and Homily, and we respond through the profession of Faith and General Intercessions. In other words, by our silence and our singing we make God's word our own, and we affirm our adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith.

I pointed out last week that Christ is present in his gathering people before Mass starts, and then Christ is present in the priest himself, who acts *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ. During the Liturgy of the Word, Christ is present in his scriptures. He is also becomes present in the midst of the faithful through his word! However, it is the reader's task to bring about this change in the focus for the assembly. That is why the reader acknowledges Christ present in the priest by bowing to him, but in that gesture the reader also takes with him or her the presence of Christ from the priest to the ambo. In other words it is the reader's task to move the focus of Christ present in the priest, to Christ present in his Word. The reader then proclaim God's Word from the lectern, the ambo, or what most people know as the pulpit. There is a structure to the readings – the first reading and Gospel are connected and the theme from these two readings is what I usually make the theme of the Mass. The second reading, however, is usually independent of the other readings, following on instead from last week's second reading. And then it all changes during the seasons of Advent and Lent, where these can be a connection between all three readings. There is a reason for choosing the readings, but time does not allow me to expand on that aspect today. Incidentally, we sit for the Readings, except when Christ speaks to us (the Gospel), when out of respect for his actual words, we stand.

Readers and the deacon (if there is one) proclaim the readings here at the ambo. Note that I said "proclaim". Anyone can read, but to proclaim God's Word needs careful preparation – checking how the reading fits into the context of the Bible, and why it has been chosen for this particular Mass, learning to pronounce difficult names, and finally praying over the passage. As a result of doing this, the reader will be able to put over to the congregation the very points that God has revealed to him or her. Ideally this preparation is done over the week leading up to the time the reader is scheduled for his or her ministry. Approaching the ambo without preparation is both a disservice to God and to the people gathered to listen to God's word. God speaks so that we might hear, not just with our ears, but with our hearts

and minds too. It is also important to acknowledge the silences that are given to us in the Liturgy of the Word, rather than madly dashing through the readings.

It is also from the ambo that the psalmist or cantor leads the responsorial psalm. The psalms have been used to give prayerful expression to the faith and feelings of God's people over the centuries. They were used by Christ himself in prayer. Usually, the psalm at Mass involves the participation of the entire assembly by means of the refrain. In addition, the *Alleluia* (or the Lenten replacement) is now construed as a preparation for the Gospel, which is why there is a long period of silence before we sing it. And it should be sung, and if not sung, omitted! If we had a Book of the Gospels, this would be carried in procession to the ambo at this time. But since these books are larger and heavier than the other lectionaries, we would have to reconstruct the pulpit!

After the readings there follows the homily. The object of the homily is to break open the Word, just as the Body of Christ under the form of bread is broken later in the Mass. Breaking open the Word should enable most people to have a better grasp of what God is telling us each Sunday. When Bishop Agnellus Andrew taught me how to preach, he told me that the sign of a good homily is that people should be able to answer the following questions: "What is this man talking about?" "What is he saying about it?" "How does it apply to me?" "So what?" I keep trying to present homilies where those questions have answers, but the last question – so what? – is the most difficult. What that should do is make the Word of God relevant to our lives today!

After the homily we stand for the Creed, which may be the Apostles' Creed or the usual Nicene Creed. We have started doing what the Bishops have recommended by using the Apostles' Creed during the Easter Season each year. The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the prayer of the faithful, the general intercessions or what we sometimes call the Bidding Prayers, in which we all fulfil our baptismal duty to pour out our petitions and intercede for the needs of the Church and the world. Incidentally, the reader gives an introduction or suggestion for prayer, but the actual prayer is what each of us prays when we say "Lord, hear us."

All of us expect our readers, musicians and preachers to prepare themselves for their tasks in the Sunday celebration. We would be offended if they did not do so. And yet all of us share in this necessity of preparation.

For years now the Church has been urging us to reflect and pray with the scriptures long before the Mass begins, ideally during the days leading up to the Sunday! How much richer our experience of the Sunday readings would be if we would meditate and pray with the texts beforehand. Why not make room in your busy life for 5 or 10 minutes of peace and quiet. Tell yourself that God has something to say to you

today. God is speaking to you through this particular passage of scripture. Then slowly read one or more of the passages assigned for the following Sunday. Let God lead you in your reading and in your praying. Doing so, will help you to appreciate even more the Liturgy of the Word at Mass.

29 January 2006

“Thanksgiving”

Over the last two weeks, we have been looking, albeit briefly, at the Mass. The first week covered the Introduction and the Gathering Rites, the coming together as one community, where no-one should feel a stranger. Last week we looked at the Liturgy of the Word, listening to God speak to us, and our responding in the various ways. Today, we will look at the Liturgy of the Eucharist, that which is central to the Mass.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

From the days of the Apostles the Church has celebrated the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus by carrying out what he did and handed over to his disciples to do in his memory. When we celebrate the Eucharist each Sunday, we are fulfilling the command the Christ gave to the Church on the night before he died: “Do this in remembrance of me” (*Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24*). This action of “doing”, of celebrating the Eucharist, has been the most cherished action of the Church since her very beginnings.

Remember that Eucharist, is derived from the Greek word *Eucharisto*, literally meaning thanks. Yet, there are many meanings of the Eucharist, and it can be viewed from many aspects. For example, the Eucharist is a meal, a banquet in which the Church shares at the table of the Lord. It is an eating and a drinking together that is done without speed and efficiency, that is so different from our fast-food meals common today. As we take time to be with one another and with the Lord, we are nourished to become one people by receiving the sacramental body and blood of Christ. However, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice, where the Church enters into the total self-giving of Christ. The sacrifice of the cross is made present and perpetuated till Christ comes again. We enter into this sacrifice by our surrender to Christ, by our dedication to doing the will of God. Similarly we can say that the Eucharist is:- a memorial of Christ, a sign of the Kingdom, a Transformation, a call to justice and peace. Indeed there are many other meanings, but time prevents me from exploring them all today.

After the assembly has been nourished at the table of God’s Word, its focus shifts to the altar – the “table of Christ’s Body”. The priest, accompanied by the deacon, moves from the chair to the altar, returning to the chair only after the Communion of

the assembly. Once again, at this time, the presence of Christ is in the priest, for he again acts *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. The altar is prepared and the offerings of bread and wine may be brought up in procession by members of the assembly and given to the priest and, if there is one, the deacon, who then formally place them on the altar.

It is important throughout the Liturgy of the Eucharist to be aware of the four verbs that move us through the biblical institution narratives – take, bless, break and give. The New Testament writers tell us that toward the beginning of the meal Jesus:

1. took bread;
2. said a prayer of blessing or praise over the bread;
3. broke the bread;
4. and distributed the bread.

Then toward the end of the meal, Jesus

5. took a cup of wine;
6. said a prayer of blessing or praise over the cup
7. and shared the contents of the cup.

Throughout the centuries many embellishments have been added within this basic framework, some of which were reordered or removed or modified as a result of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's. More recently, abuses that have crept in have been dealt with in the latest *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* of 2002.

What occurs at the altar prior to the eucharistic prayer corresponds to the action of taking. It is now seen, therefore, as the preparation of the gifts, and *not* as it used to be called in the past, an "Offertory". The actual Offertory occurs within the Eucharistic Prayer. The prayers during this preparation rite, or "setting of the table", accompany the placing of the elements of bread and wine on the altar after these offerings are received from the people. The bread and wine are symbols of ourselves, our work, our stewardship of God's creation.

It has been debated as to whether Jesus meant to take bread and wine, or whether he meant to take the staples of the country. In other words, if we were in China, could we take rice and tea, or if we were in Italy, could we take pasta and olive oil? The Church, however, instructs us that we use true bread and true wine. The bread, while remaining unleavened, should nonetheless be of such texture and quality that we can experience it as real bread. Further, the latest instruction emphasises the fact that the faithful should receive communion from elements consecrated at that particular Mass, rather than from the tabernacle. Although not perfect in this practice, we are moving towards this ideal. That will mean that the tabernacle becomes what it was always meant to me – merely a "storage box" for communion for the sick. [The Tabernacle only comes into importance after Mass, since the

presence of Christ is emphasised elsewhere during Mass! That is why the priest and ministers only acknowledge the Tabernacle before Mass and after Mass, but not during Mass!]

The Procession with the Gifts is a powerful expression of the assembly's participation in the Eucharist and in the social mission of the Church. That is why, along with the bread and wine, monetary gifts are also presented. These are used not only for the needs of the community, but also, as the rubrics state, "for the poor". The collection and presentation of the gifts, then, form an expression of the whole assembly's participation in the eucharist and in the social ministry of the Church. The rite of the preparation of the gifts concludes with the prayer over the offerings.

The biblical action of blessing corresponds to the great eucharistic prayer, which has its roots in the Jewish prayer, known as the "berakah". The single eucharistic prayer, known as the Roman Canon, has since Vatican II been augmented by three other prayers, one based on a text in the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, and dated about 215 AD (which we know as Eucharistic Prayer 2), and another based on a version of the *Anaphora* of St Basil, used widely in the Eastern Churches (which we know as Eucharistic Prayer 4). We also have "Eucharistic Prayers for Masses of Reconciliation", "Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children" and more recently for "Eucharistic Prayers for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions". All the eucharistic prayers are statements of joyful praise and thanksgiving, proclaiming the past, present and future saving actions of God among us. Christians are called to be eucharistic people, always thanking God for all that he has done for us. Indeed, giving thanks not only helps us to acknowledge what is good, but opens us up to receive more deeply and fruitfully the goodness of God's gifts to us.

At the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer, the account of the Last Supper is recited. The words of Jesus, in which he gave himself to his disciples as their food and drink, are now repeated in the context of this prayer of praise. In the power of the Spirit, these words achieve what they promise and express the presence of Christ and his Sacrifice among his people assembled.

The presence of Christ is perhaps best known at this part of the Mass, when the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ. We call this transubstantiation or, as I prefer, trans-creation, but it is too great a moment and too important to just mention in passing, and on another occasion I will preach about this in more detail. It is this presence of Christ, that the priest acknowledges by genuflecting at the altar.

And another thing: the whole reason for the priest facing the people is so that people can see what is going on. When the priest holds up the consecrated bread and wine, he does so in order for everyone to look up and worship, not bow their heads in some form of false humility and piety! The bowing comes after, when the priest genuflects in reverence. That might be a surprise to many, and it may take some time to get out of the old way of keeping our heads bowed, sometimes in our hands at the elevation, and change to looking up with love and adoration! But look up is what we are asked to do! Remember, doing the same action together underlines our unity. Doing our own thing does the opposite!

5 February 2006

“Communion”

Last week we started looking at the Liturgy of the Eucharist in our five week excursion on the Mass. You will remember that there are four verbs that move us through the biblical institution narratives – take, bless, break and give. The New Testament writers tell us that toward the beginning of the meal Jesus:

1. took bread;
2. said a prayer of blessing or praise over the bread;
3. broke the bread;
4. and distributed the bread.

Then toward the end of the meal, Jesus

5. took a cup of wine;
6. said a prayer of blessing or praise over the cup
7. and shared the contents of the cup.

Last week we looked at the “taking”, that is everything from the Procession of the Gifts to the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, and the “blessing”, that is the Eucharistic Prayer in its various forms. Today we will be looking at the “breaking” and “giving” parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

But first of all, a word about posture during this part of the Mass. The posture for public prayer in the Church, following the Jewish tradition, is and always has been standing! Kneeling is the posture for private, devotional prayer. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* indicates that we should be either standing or sitting throughout the Mass, but not kneeling! In particular, we are told that we should stand from the prayer “Pray that our sacrifice may be acceptable ...” until after the last person has received Holy Communion. You may experience this posture of standing if you attend Mass in most of mainland Europe or other parts of the world. To stand for such a long period can be very demanding on everyone, particularly those with children and the aged and infirm, so I am pleased that our Bishops have decided that we should continue doing whatever the local tradition might be. That

means that for the moment, we, along with most congregations in these isles will carry on with the tradition of kneeling. However, be prepared for different traditions in different places, such as chaplaincies, at house masses, on pilgrimage or even in some religious houses, where everyone may be invited to stand or sit. Once again, doing the same action together expresses out unity, even if we may feel uncomfortable sometimes.

So now let us see what happens after the eucharistic prayers. The assembly prepares itself for the breaking of the bread and the reception or distribution of the gift, that is Communion. The Our Father is followed by the sign of peace. By the way, there is no reason why husbands and wives shouldn't give each other a kiss at this point – it does look and feel odd giving a handshake to the person that we love next to us! Some of our Indian friends prefer to join their hands and bow; others prefer just to shake hands. This time the way it is done doesn't matter, but our offering a sign of peace to those around us is not optional, for once again, it underlines our unity around Christ's altar. I would hope that no-one refuses to offer peace these days!

The breaking of bread follows, and is an ancient action of unity, for, as St Paul said, we all receive from the same loaf (*1 Corinthians 10:16-17*). It is also for this reason that I use a large communion host, so that the breaking of bread can be seen and also appreciated by those who receive from this one loaf.

These actions – the Lord's Prayer, the Sign of Peace and the Breaking of Bread, lead us to, and prepare us for Holy Communion. Communion may be given to all under both kinds, since that is Christ's invitation – "Eat my Body, drink my Blood!" The reception of Holy Communion has changed from receiving under both kinds in the early Church, to a reception under the form of bread, and then only very rarely in the Middle Ages. After Vatican II it returned to a weekly or daily reception under the form of bread, and now it is back to the tradition of the early church, namely reception under both kinds on a weekly or daily basis. The Church has always taught that Christ is received whole and entire, body and soul, in his humanity and his divinity, even when communion is received under one form only. But when we receive from the cup, the sign of the meal is more apparent. I therefore, once again, encourage those who perhaps have shied away from receiving the cup up until now, to reconsider the invitation of Christ to eat his body AND drink his blood.

Over recent years, a presumption has come about that every time we come to Church we should receive Holy Communion. At a recent meeting of the priests of the diocese with the Bishop, it was decided that Communion Services during the week should come to an end, so that people should only receive Holy Communion in Church when attending Mass. The Bishop will be writing a Pastoral Letter on this subject soon, but for the moment we need to appreciate that Holy Communion is the

culmination of the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, not something that can be received in its own right.

And that brings me on to a more difficult problem – that of who has the right to receive Holy Communion.

Communion is a sign of unity – “cum unione” meaning “in union with”. This means that those who receive Holy Communion are “in union with” the Catholic Church, and all that the Catholic Church preaches and teaches. It means being “in union with” the rules and regulations of the Church, “in union with” the Pope and the Bishops, “in union with” all the moral pronouncements of the Catholic Church. If someone does not agree with this union, then they exclude themselves from union with the Church, and consequently from receiving Holy Communion.

Those who are conscious of grave sin should not receive communion without going to confession first. Missing Mass on a Sunday or Holyday of Obligation is sinful. Only serious sickness amounts to a valid excuse. Yet I often hear individuals confess that they missed Mass “but they were travelling”. Here’s some news for you – travelling on a Sunday does not excuse from the obligation of hearing Mass! If you are away from your parish, then times and places of Masses can be found out – either through me, a Diocesan Directory or even the internet. And if you are travelling on a Sunday, you can always fulfil the obligation by attending a Vigil Mass on the Saturday evening somewhere!

But it is not just missing Mass that is classed as gravely sinful. Couples who are in an irregular marriage, that is a marriage that is not recognised by the Church, should refrain from receiving Holy Communion, as should co-habiting couples. Many such situations can be explained either in a private appointment or in the context of confession if you are not sure. One situation that I must emphasise on the other side of the coin, however, is that someone who has only been divorced, but not remarried, can receive Holy Communion.

Some people arrive very late at Mass, perhaps even during the Our Father, and then present themselves for Holy Communion. This should stop! Receiving Holy Communion is the culmination of all that has happened during the Mass, from the gathering rites to the final dismissal.

To sum up, then, for Catholics: As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a

grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (Code of Canon Law, canon 916). A frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

Although we welcome other Christians to the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844, §3). All who are not receiving Holy Communion, including non-Christians, are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

In the past, I mentioned the two problems with bread and wine. The first concerns the celiac, who is unable to tolerate gluten. Yet without gluten, we would not have bread. The Church is incessant that low-gluten, rather than gluten-free or rice-hosts be provided for those who are celiacs, and throughout the world various orders of nuns are at this time experimenting in baking bread with lower and lower gluten. Without gluten the bread falls apart. But at present they are producing something like one part gluten to several thousand parts bread, but even this is too much gluten for some.

A similar problem arises with the alcoholic. The Church instructs us that the wine to be used at Mass, must be fermented from the grape, which means that there be alcohol present in the wine – we cannot use grape juice. In fact, many of the companies that produce “altar wine” produce wine with a very high alcohol content, so that once the bottle is opened it does not go off quickly. This was ideal in days gone by when only the priest might receive the consecrated wine, but today, a high alcohol content is not necessary, since we don’t have the problem of half-full wine bottles – most churches will, for example, use a full bottle of wine over a weekend. For the alcoholic priest, however, a dispensation can be sought from the Vatican, so that he uses “mustum”, rather than true wine.

The latest instruction from Rome says that we should all make some sign of reverence before we receive Holy Communion. In order that there be some conformity in countries, it is up to the Conferences of Bishops to determine what that sign will be. Our bishops have determined that the action of walking solemnly in procession, preferably singing the communion hymn, is our sign of reverence in preparation for receiving Communion. Our unity is again expressed by our saying “Amen” as we receive the consecrated host. This is either on the tongue (not the

letter-box) or in the hand – one hand under the other, and communicating with by picking the host up with the finger and thumb – not the Anglican way of eating from the palm of the hand!

After a period of silence with the priest normally seated in the presidential chair, this section of the Mass concludes with the prayer after Communion, when we ask that the spiritual effects of the Eucharist be expressed in the lives of those who have received.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist then, is our response to God bringing about transformation not only in bread and wine, but in us as well. The preparation of the altar and of the gifts help us dispose ourselves to share in the table of the Lord. The Eucharistic Prayer is the high point of the Eucharistic Liturgy, and in the communion rite our signs of unity are expressed in the sharing of Christ's body and blood.

12 February 2006

“Mission”

The Concluding Rites

Over the last four weeks we have once again looked at the Mass.

After the Communion Rite, the Mass closes with a brief Concluding Rite. Its purpose is to send the people forth to put into effect in their daily lives the Paschal Mystery and the unity in Christ which they have celebrated. They are given a sense of abiding mission, which calls them to witness to Christ in the world and to bring the Gospel to the poor.

The Concluding Rite consists of:

Brief announcements, if they are necessary;

The priest's greeting and blessing, which on certain days and occasions is enriched and expressed in the Prayer over the People or another more solemn formula;

The dismissal of the people by the deacon or the priests, so that each member goes out to do good works, praising and blessing God;

The kissing of the altar by the priest and deacon, followed by a profound bow to the altar by the priest and ministers;

An orderly procession of the ministers and the assembly;

When another liturgical rite is to follow immediately, e.g. the final commendation at a funeral, the entire concluding rite is omitted because these other rites will have their own form of conclusion.

Just as the introductory comments by the priest at the beginning of the celebration may help the assembly to a better appreciation and experience of the mysteries celebrated in the Eucharist, so also the pastoral announcements at the end may help the people make the transition from worship into renewed Christian awareness in society. They should help people become aware of the faith life and pastoral activity of the community and invite participation in the ongoing work of the Church.

On occasions, perhaps in connection with special appeals and collections, someone may be invited to speak to the assembly in connection with this work. Where possible, it is desirable that that person participate in the whole celebration!

It is fitting for Holy Communion to be taken directly from Mass to the sick and those unable to leave their homes. Commissioned ministers of Holy Communion receive a pyx from the priest and are “sent” to take Holy Communion and leave the assembly. These ministers may depart before the Final Blessing.

For the final greeting, the words: “The Lord be with you” help the assembly to focus attention again on the prayerful aspect of the blessing.

As Scripture attests, all beings are created and kept in existence by God’s gracious goodness. They are themselves blessings from God and should move us to bless God in return. This is above all true since the Word has come in flesh to make all things holy by the mystery of the incarnation.

Blessings, therefore, refer first and foremost to God, whose majesty and goodness they extol, and they involve human beings, whom God governs and by divine providence protects. The form of blessings, whether it be a solemn blessing or with a Prayer over the People, all conclude with the Trinitarian formulary, during which the priest traces the Sign of the Cross over the members of the assembly, as they make the Sign of the Cross on themselves.

The Dismissal sends the members of the congregation forth to praise and bless the Lord in the midst of their daily responsibilities. The Roman Rite actually suggests that instrumental music, such as an organ voluntary, is more appropriate than a final hymn or song, since keeping people in their place after the dismissal detracts somewhat from the dimension of missionary imperative present in the dismissal texts!!

Hymn Singing!! Why are hymns chosen – all fit theme of Liturgy. Not a case of singing someone’s favourites – gone are days when we have case of “Mrs So-and-so can choose her favourite hymns for Mass this weekend!”

To sum up some points.

Mobile Phones – at least put onto silent mode!

Tabernacle – the latest instruction emphasises the fact that the faithful should receive communion from elements consecrated at that particular Mass, rather than from the tabernacle. Although not perfect in this practice, we are moving towards this ideal. That will mean that the tabernacle becomes what it was always meant to be – merely a “storage box” for communion for the sick. [The Tabernacle only comes into importance after Mass, since the presence of Christ is emphasised elsewhere during Mass! That is why the priest and ministers only acknowledge the Tabernacle before Mass and after Mass, but not during Mass!]

If most people can make the effort to arrive in good time for the start of Mass, I would urge the persistent late-comers to do their best to arrive in time too, so that the flow of the Mass is not interrupted by people coming in late. But if you are late, then please come into the church directly – don't wait in the porch, where you actually become more of a distraction, and by doing so block one of our fire exits!

I do not mind the different forms of prayer that children may use – even if others call it noise! If you must bring some toys to calm them down, might I suggest quiet, soft toys or even children's books with plenty of pictures. A noisy toy, especially when banged on the bench, does distract people from the Mass.

Nothing gets a gathering of people together into a unified body better than singing. So don't leave it to others – make sure you have a hymn book, and give singing a go!

How much richer our experience of the Sunday readings would be if we would meditate and pray with the texts beforehand. Why not make room in your busy life for 5 or 10 minutes of peace and quiet.

The whole reason for the priest facing the people is so that people can see what is going on. When the priest holds up the consecrated bread and wine, he does so in order for everyone to look up and worship, not bow their heads in some form of false humility and piety! The bowing comes after, when the priest genuflects in reverence.

Remember, doing the same action together underlines our unity. Doing our own thing does the opposite!

I therefore, once again, encourage those who perhaps have shied away from receiving the cup up until now, to reconsider the invitation of Christ to eat his body AND drink his blood.

We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. Some people arrive very late at Mass, perhaps even during the Our Father, and then present themselves for Holy Communion. This should stop! Receiving Holy Communion is the culmination of all that has happened during the Mass, from the gathering rites to the final dismissal.

Our unity is again expressed by our saying “Amen” as we receive the consecrated host. This is either on the tongue (not the letter-box) or in the hand – one hand under the other, and communicating with by picking the host up with the finger and thumb – not the Anglican way of eating from the palm of the hand!

Finally, the Concluding Rites send us forth to continue to praise God and to do the good works of the Kingdom. Once the Liturgy of the Eucharist has been concluded, the assembly’s focus once again returns to the presidential chair, to Christ present once again in the priest. The concluding rites consist merely of brief announcements, a greeting, a blessing and the dismissal (usually by the deacon). To bless a person is an action requesting that God continue to extend his generosity and love upon that person. But of course, if you have disappeared before the end of Mass, you do not benefit from that blessing! As the priest leaves the sanctuary, the presence of Christ returns to those gathered in his name, to the assembly, which departs praising God.

I know we have covered a tremendous amount of material in the last three weeks, and I also know that it is almost impossible to take in everything that I have said. However, I will put the contents of these homilies on the parish web-page and will run off a few printed copies, so that those of you who are interested can peruse things at your leisure. Thank you for your patience over this time.