

The Mysteries of the Mass

In this video, I'd like to begin our study of the Mass by emphasizing the reality of the Mass as a mystery. Now, before I do that, it's important to emphasize that for many of us, the Mass might actually seem not very mysterious because it's so familiar. So, for example, if you're like me and you're a cradle Catholic and you've gone to Mass your entire life, much of what we do and say at the Mass is so familiar that it actually can be very rote. It can be things that we say from memory, do from memory. We can easily go through the motions. However, while many of us as Catholics may know what to do, what to say, when to stand, when to sit, when to kneel and all that kind of stuff, we often don't know why we do it or what the deeper meaning of these rites and rituals, postures, ceremonies, and formulas of the Mass actually point to.

So what I want to do in this video is just emphasize that the Mass itself tells us that there's something mysterious going on in the liturgy, that there's some invisible reality behind the visible signs and symbols, rites, and words of the Liturgy. For example, if you look at the actual rite of Mass, I have here my own personal Roman Missal, this is a Mass book. It describes the order of Mass as well as the reading for the Mass. If you look in the missal, there are three key parts of the Mass that tell us that the Mass is a mystery.

The first one comes from the Introductory Rites in the Penitential Act, when the priest will say at the beginning of Mass, "Brethren, let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries."¹ In Latin, the *sacra mysteria*, these sacred mysteries. So already from the beginning of Mass, the Mass itself is telling us that something sacred or holy or set apart is taking place, and that it's something mysterious. In other words, there's an invisible reality that's hidden from us, taking place behind the visible reality.

¹ Roman Missal, Order of Mass, nos. 4, 24, 91. For an accessible edition of the original Latin text of the Order of Mass, see Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition (ed. James Socias; Woodridge, Ill.: Midwest Theological Forum; Huntington, Ind.; Our Sunday Visitor, 2011).

The second time the Mass tells us that it's a mystery is in the liturgy of the Eucharist and the Offertory, when the priest or deacon is mixing the water and wine and says these words: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." I don't know if you've ever noticed that. Often, we'll chant a hymn over that at Sunday Mass, so you can't hear it. But if you go to daily Mass, you'll hear the priest often praying those words when he's mixing the water and wine. So again, the Offertory tells us that there's something invisible happening. There's some mystery taking place during the liturgy.

And then the third one, the most obvious one here is during the Liturgy of the Eucharist itself, during the Eucharistic Prayer. After the words of consecration, after the priest says, "This is my body" and "this is my blood," he will lift up the chalice and the host and say "the mystery of faith." In Latin, "mysterium fidei." And he'll often sing that part. So it's a very solemn, very sacred moment. In some ways, in a sense the climax of the Eucharistic liturgy actually identifies what's happening as a mystery, that there's some invisible reality behind the visible rite of the consecration and elevation of the host.

So we have three clues here in the Mass itself to the fact that the Mass isn't just a ceremony. It's not just a worship service. It is a mystery. Now, what does that mean? Well, the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a good clue to what this means in its section on the liturgy, its section on the Eucharist. One of the neat things about the new Catechism of the Catholic Church that came out in 1992 is that it doesn't just have a section on the seven sacraments, like in the older catechism of the Council of Trent, it went through the seven sacraments. But the new catechism also has a section on the liturgy, on the Sacred Liturgy itself, following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Liturgy. And so in the Catechism, in paragraph 774 and 1075, there's a discussion of what we mean when we talk about the mystery of the Mass or the mystery of the liturgy. Listen to the teaching of the Church on this point. It says this:

The Greek word *mysterion* was translated into Latin by two terms: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. In later usage the term *sacramentum* emphasizes the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation which was

indicated by the term *mysterium*. In this sense, Christ himself is the mystery of salvation: "For there is no other mystery of God, except Christ."

So, if you notice, that's very interesting. In the West, we tend to talk about the sacraments, but in the East, they will talk about the mysteries. Both words point to the fact that there are external signs, the sacraments, and invisible realities, the mysteries. There's the visible sacraments and the invisible mystery. And so when we talk about the mystery of the Mass it is emphasizing that there is something happening behind the visible. And what the Catechism goes on to say in paragraph 1075 is that catechesis on the Mass, or catechesis on the liturgy, actually has as its goal to move us from the visible to the invisible, from the sacrament to the mystery. Here are the words of the Catechism. It picks up again and says this:

Liturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (It is "mystagogy.") by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the "sacraments" to the "mysteries."

That word there, "mystagogy," is very important. It really reflects a large part of what I'm going to be doing in this series. *Mystagogy*, in Greek, comes from two words: *ago*, which means to lead, and *mysterion*, which means mystery. So mystagogical catechesis on the liturgy is actually literally translated as meaning to initiate or to lead into the mysteries. This is the kind of catechesis on the Mass that was done all the way back in ancient times by figures like St. Ambrose of Milan or St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who gave lectures on the liturgy to people who were coming into the Church so that they could move beyond the visible signs and symbols to the invisible reality of what was actually taking place. So St. Ambrose has a treatise on the mysteries and on the sacraments, and St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in the 4th century, has a treatise on...it's called the *Mystagogical Catechesis*. Basically, what they're doing is explaining things like the sign of the cross, the bread, the wine of the Eucharist, the Real Presence, all those kinds of things, and the actions and ceremonies of the Mass so that people who are coming into the Church would actually understand what they were doing. And the way they did this mystagogical catechesis, was they would go back to two things: Scripture, like what are the biblical roots of the different parts of the liturgy, and tradition: where do these come from in the tradition handed down to us by the Apostles.

So what I'm going to be doing in this series as we walk through the parts of the Mass and the formulas and prayers of the Mass, is I'm going to try to imitate the Church Fathers in their mystagogical catechesis and take the lead from the Catechism here by looking at three things. First, as we move through the parts of the Mass, we're going to ask, where does this part of the Mass come from in Scripture? In other words, what are the biblical roots of the Mass? And if you know me, you know I'm not just going to look at the scriptural roots of the Mass in the New Testament, we're going to look at the scriptural roots of the Mass in the Old Testament in particular. So if you wanted to give a title to the series, part of it is going to involve the Jewish roots of Catholic liturgy, the Jewish roots of the Roman Catholic Rite, in particular. So we're going to look at the Temple, we're going to look at the synagogue, we're going to look at the priesthood and the sacrifices of the Old covenant and how they're fulfilled in the Mass.

But we're not going to stop there. One of the unique things we're going to also do as we move through the parts of the Mass is we're going to ask not only where does it come from in the Bible, but where do they come from in Sacred Tradition? In other words, when in the history of the Church were each of the various parts of the Mass added to the Mass by great Saints and popes in the Church? We're going to look at the traditional forms of the Mass, both in ancient times as well as the Middle Ages and all the way up to the modern period, to the 16th century, from the Council of Trent all the way up to the Second Vatican Council, Vatican II, and today. So that we can see how the Mass flows not only out of Sacred Scripture but also out of Sacred Tradition.

And what I hope you'll see is that when we do that, when we look at the roots of the Mass in Scripture and the roots of the Mass in Tradition, it's going to help us understand the mysticism of the Mass, understand the mystical meaning of the prayers of the Mass, of the gestures in the Mass, like kneeling, bowing, or standing or sitting, or some of the gestures of the priest, like praying with his hands folded or praying with his hands extended. The signs of the cross that the priest will make as he's offering the Eucharistic Prayer. So all of these various actions of the Mass, we're going to be able to understand mystically what's happening at this point in the Mass. Why are we singing "Holy, Holy, Holy"? Why do we say "Kyrie

eleison"? What does that reveal to us about where we are spiritually and interiorly as we move through the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist? I hope that you'll see that this biblical and traditional approach to the liturgy is going to help us also see the mysticism of the Mass and the mystical and spiritual meanings of the Mass and what their implications are for how we live our Catholic faith today.

Now, along the way, as we look at the liturgy of the Mass, this is going to help shed some light on contemporary discussions of the liturgy today in a few areas that you will want to keep in mind. First of all, we are going to talk about the mystery of the language of the Mass. What role should, for example, sacred language, like Latin or Greek or even Hebrew, play in the Mass, and what role should the vernacular have in the Mass? So how does language play itself out in the liturgy of the Roman Rite? Another question we'll look at is the relationship and the role of sacred music. Hymns of praise, the chanting of psalms, as well as some of the biblical and even Jewish roots of later chant, commonly referred to as Gregorian chant, because of its tie with St. Gregory the Great, one of the key liturgical reformers in the history of the Roman Rite. We'll also look at sacred ceremonies of the Mass, like various gestures and postures, as well as orientation in the Mass. What is the direction of prayer that the priest will take with reference to the altar or with reference to the people. So we will look at all that, where it comes from in the Bible and tradition.

And then last, but certainly not least, one of the mysteries of the Mass, which is technically not a mystery in the sense that it leads us to an invisible reality, but it's a mystery in the sense that it's often puzzling to people, and that has to do with the development of the liturgy. How has the Mass changed over time? Have things been added to the Mass? Have things been subtracted from the Mass? If so, why? What were the reasons for the changes, and who had the authority to change the Mass? Where does that come from? In particular, we're going to focus on Vatican II, the Second Vatican Council, and the changes that it introduced into the Mass. What were those changes and why were they made? What were the reasons for the changes? And again, who has the authority to make those kinds of changes? And as you'll see, as we move through the Mass, one of the mysteries of the Mass that I hope to shed some light on is the particular role of the popes in developing the

liturgy of the Roman Rite. In some ways, the Roman liturgy is a pastiche of different prayers, actions, signs, and symbols of popes throughout the centuries, not only in the early centuries but also in the Middle Ages and the modern period, all the way up to today. Popes like St. Gelasius, St. Gregory the Great, Pope Innocent III, Pope St. Pius V, all the way up to the most recent popes, Pope St. Paul VI and St. John Paul II. So I hope it will shed some light on the mystery, so to speak, of the development of the liturgy.

Now, in the final analysis, the ultimate goal of our study is going to be to deepen our understanding, so that as Catholics, when we celebrate the Mass, when we pray the Mass, when we participate in the Mass, we don't just know what to do, but why we do it. Why we do it based on where it comes from in Scripture and where it comes from in the tradition of the Church as guided by the magisterium. And I hope that when we do that, you'll have the same experience I've had in preparing this study, which is that I find myself able to pray the Mass with more intention and attention and to enter more deeply into the mysteries of the Mass, not only through my active participation in the prayers and rites of the Mass but through what you might call my contemplative participation in praying the Mass, in pondering the mysteries of the Mass and moving from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the sacrament to the mystery. So I hope you'll join me and enjoy our journey through the mysteries of the Mass.