

# I. Introductory Rites: Forming a Community to Worship

## An Introduction to this series of articles

Now that the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) has appeared, been translated, and is now in its near-final form, Archbishop Curtiss has asked that parishes take the opportunity to offer a more in-depth look at the Mass and its meaning. This series of 11 articles is offers us that chance.

*Institutio Generalis*, or "General Instruction," refers to the introductory material in the Roman Missal, the Sacramentary. Like all Rites since Vatican II, this *Institutio* provides the theological and pastoral context for the instructions and rubrics of the Mass.

## It is good for us to be here.

The new *Institutio* describes the Introductory Rites as having the character of a beginning, introduction, and preparation. Their purpose is: that the faithful coming together, take on the form of a community and prepare themselves to listen attentively to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily. (GIRM, paragraph 46)

This points to two very important elements of the introductory rites. When the bishops of the Second Vatican Council described the ways in which Christ is present in the celebration of the liturgy, they underscored these four: Christ is present in the priest-presider, in the Word proclaimed, most especially in the Eucharist, and in "the Church that prays and sings." (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 7) ["For where two or three are gathered together in my name..." (Mt. 18:20)] Thus, our coming together for worship is a response to God's initiative and invitation so that, when we do gather, we manifest the Body of Christ in the world.

"In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else..." (CSL 14)

More than just being "nice for us to be here," the coming together of the faithful reveals for all to see that the Mass is "the action of Christ and the Church." (GIRM 20) And so, the "full, active, and conscious participation of the faithful" describes *how* the assembly manifests Christ at worship.

The second important element of paragraph 46 in the *Institutio* describes the *purpose* of the Introductory Rites. These rites are intended to be the *means by which we prepare* to hear the Word of God. We say here, at least implicitly, that the Body of Christ in the world still needs deeper conversion by hearing the Word of God.

"When the Scriptures are read in Church, God himself is speaking to his people and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel." (GIRM 29)

## Good beginnings

Those among us old enough to remember the Latin Mass would know this part as the *Prayers at the Foot of the Altar*. These prayers served as the priest's private, personal preparation before the beginning of Mass. They were never directly part of the people's preparation in the Tridentine Rite.

### The Introductory Rites include:

The Entrance Song  
The Greeting  
The Rite of Sprinkling of Holy Water (or)  
The Penitential Rite (includes three forms)  
The Kyrie  
The Glory to God  
The Opening Prayer.

## What is the purpose of the Introductory Rites?

"The purpose of these rites is that the faithful who are assembling should become a community and dispose themselves to listen properly to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.." (GIRM 46)

The Introductory Rites succeed in their purpose as the gathering of disparate individuals forms into a conscious, worshipping community ready to listen and celebrate. The oneness of the community in prayer and song more fully manifests the presence of Christ.

## The Entrance Song

The Entrance Song is meant to foster the formation of a community that worships and reveals the presence of Christ. Note how GIRM 47 describes the four-fold purpose of the Opening Song:

"After the people have gathered, the entrance chant begins as the priest enters with the deacon and ministers. The purpose of singing at this time is to *open the celebration*, intensify the unity of those who have assembled, lead their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers." (Italics added.)

## Sign of the Cross and Greeting

In the same way, the sign of the cross and greeting by the priest-celebrant are meant to continue making the presence of Christ known actively, fully, and consciously to the gathered Church.

"Then through the greeting the priest signifies the presence of the Lord to the community gathered together. *By this greeting and the people's response the mystery of the Church gathered together is made known.*" (GIRM 48)

## Penitential Rite

The current Roman Missal offers the priest-celebrant two options - the Penitential Rite or the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling with Holy Water. The liturgical season usually dictates the choice.

"On Sundays, especially in the Season of Easter, in place of the customary Act of Penitence, from time to time *the blessing and sprinkling of water to recall Baptism may take place.*" (GIRM 51)

It is helpful to recall that the Introductory Rites may be omitted if another ritual is celebrated at Mass following the Word (e.g., infant baptism).

Most of the time, however, the faithful experience the Penitential Rite as part of the beginning rites. The presider may choose from three options. The *Confiteor*, a shorter litany, and the *Kyrie Eleison* or *Lord, have mercy*.

"Since *it is a chant by which the faithful acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy*, It is ordinarily done by all, that is, by the people and with the choir or cantor having a part in it." (GIRM 52)

The stance of the faithful in the *Kyrie* is first praise, based on faith in God's mercy. Then, secondly, we ask for mercy. It is not a time to focus on our sinfulness *only*, but to glorify Christ who loves us and knows us as sinners. In this way, the rite models for us a strongly relational character.

## Clarifications regarding the Penitential Rite

Over the years, the use of the Penitential Rite has led to one or other misconception. First, it is not always required as some may think. It may be replaced by another sacramental introduction. Secondly, it is not just like going to confession, it is merely part of the rites that prepare us for the rest of the Mass. Thus, the revised *Institutio* states:

"Then the priest invites them to take part in the penitential rite, which, after a brief pause for silence, the entire community carries out through a formula of general confession, and which is concluded with the priest's absolution. *This latter, however, lacks the efficacy of the sacrament of penance.*" (GIRM #51)

This is the first in a series of 11 or so articles on the celebration of the Mass.  
Article #2 is entitled, *Hearing the Word*.

## The Glory to God

The *Gloria* is an ancient text – a non-biblical "psalm" based on New Testament hymns. It began as part of morning prayer and, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was added to Christmas Mass. It is a vitally Trinitarian prayer that praises God for the divine mercy shown throughout salvation history. Today, the Church says or sings it during our "high" seasons – Easter and Christmas and Solemnities – and fasts from it in Lent and Advent. Its place in the liturgy is so venerable that another hymn or text may not replace it.

## The Collect, or Opening Prayer

The priest says, "Let us pray," and the assembly prays in silence for a moment. Then, he says the Opening Prayer and "collects" the prayers that the faithful make in silence and directs them to the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit.. Then all are seated. A successful conclusion to the introductory rites leaves our hearts ready to hear and respond to the Word of God.

"All, together with the priest, observe a brief silence so that they may realize they are in God's presence and may call their petitions to mind. Then the priest speaks the prayer, which custom has named "the collect" and through which the character of the celebration is expressed." (GIRM 54)

## For discussion/reflection:

- At what point in the liturgy are you ready to be present to God, to others, to the prayer?
- How does the parish build a worshipping community at Mass? Outside Mass?
- What else do I need to understand to be able to enter into the Introductory Rites? What did I learn from this article that is new?
- What word, prayer or action will I look for next week as a way to enter into the Introductory Rites?

The text of the *Institutio* or *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) was published in English spring, 2003. Archbishop Curtiss has determined that the Church in Omaha will implement the ritual plan of the GIRM on the First Sunday of Advent, 2003.

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