

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 7 – The Introductory Rites

The Introductory Rites precede the Liturgy of the Word, and include the Entrance, the Greeting, the Penitential Act, the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria in excelsis*, and the Collect. The purpose of these rites is “to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.” (*GIRM*, 46).

The Entrance occurs when the people have gathered, and the Priest enters in procession with the Deacon (if present) and the other ministers. During this procession, the Entrance Chant is sung. There are many ways that this can be done; in many parishes it is often a hymn or song. But hymns are actually chosen to replace some of the other options, which are based around the singing of an antiphon and psalm. This antiphon generally is proposed by the Church in the liturgical books to set the tone for the celebration. But if the Entrance Chant is not sung, then the antiphon from the Missal is recited, sometimes by the priest or a lector, sometimes by everyone (this tends to happen more often at weekday Masses). The purpose of the chant is “to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompany the procession of the Priest and ministers.” (*GIRM*, 47).

When the procession reaches the sanctuary, those who aren't holding anything bow (or genuflect if the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament is present in the sanctuary), and the Priest and Deacon reverence the altar with a kiss.

We show reverence to the altar because it is the place where the sacrifice of the Mass takes place, where Christ is made present, and where we are called to share in the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb. It symbolizes the Lord's table and the Lord's tomb (which is why traditionally in the Roman Rite at least the top should be made of stone, though other materials are allowed in certain

places, for example, wood in the United States). It cannot be treated as any ordinary table: only those elements which are needed for the Holy Sacrifice or closely related to it are placed upon it.

The altar customarily has relics of one or more Saints, preferably of martyrs, either beneath the surface of the altar, or buried beneath it. This hearkens back to the early tradition of building altars and churches over the tombs of the martyrs (as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is built over St. Peter's tomb), recalling the words from Revelation: “I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the Word of God and for the witness they have given.” (Rev 6:9)

Then the Priest, together with those present, makes the Sign of the Cross. The Sign of the Cross is an encapsulation of our faith. As Pope Francis has put it: “The whole prayer moves, so to speak, within the space of the Most Holy Trinity – ‘In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ -, which is the space of infinite communion; it has as its beginning and end the love of the Triune God, made manifest and given to us in the Cross of Christ. In fact his Paschal Mystery is the gift of the Trinity, and the Eucharist flows ever from [Christ's] pierced Heart. When we make the sign of the Cross, therefore, we not only commemorate our Baptism, but affirm that the liturgical prayer is the encounter with God in Jesus Christ, who became flesh, died on the Cross and rose in glory for us.” (Wednesday Audience, 20 Dec 2017). So much meaning in such a small gesture! We should be careful to make the Sign of the Cross with intention, recognizing that we sign ourselves with such a deep mystery

Then follows the Greeting: “The Lord be with you,” and the response: “And with your spirit.” But there is a surprising amount to say about that, so it will have to wait for the next article!

