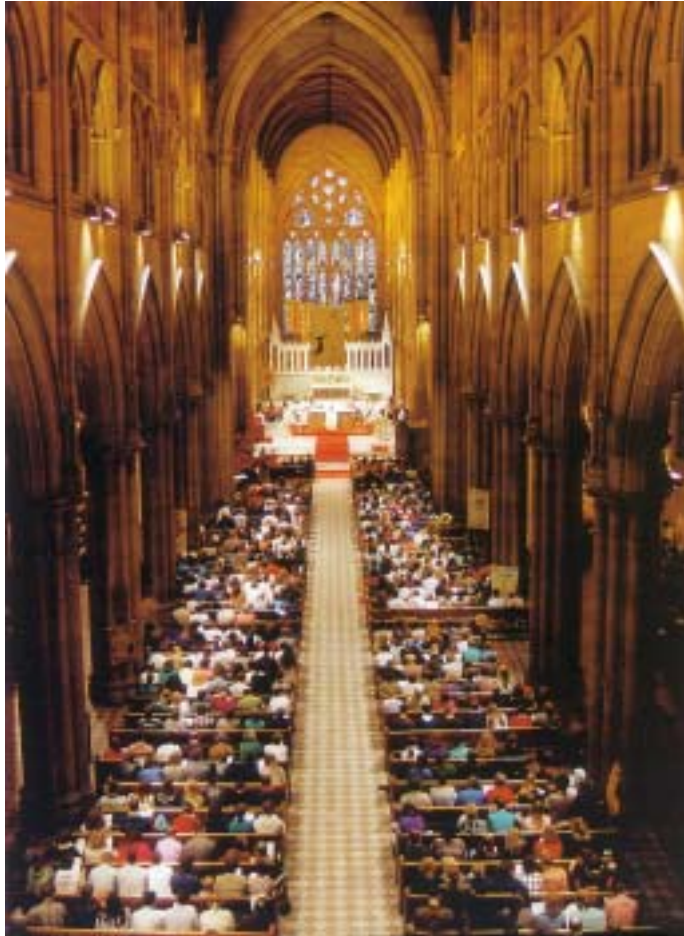


Why go to Mass?

The Catholic celebration of the Sunday Eucharist



Anna's story

When I was sixteen I decided Mass was a waste of time. It was boring. Irrelevant. It didn't make sense. So I told my parents Mass was off my weekly agenda. Sharp words were exchanged. Anger. Hurt. Silence. I was even more determined to quit Mass going.

It was a couple of days before we were able to sit down and talk about it. This time I didn't get the 'Mass is good for you' lecture I expected. To my surprise, my parents simply said: 'Anna, we can't make you appreciate Mass. We can only tell you this: it means so much to **us**.'

I was quite taken aback. I hadn't realised just how much the Mass meant to my parents. Something twinged deep down inside. But it wasn't until I was 18 that the penny dropped. It's hard to explain, and this might sound dumb, but it's true: God touched me in a special way. It was as if I came to know and love the **people** of the church in a whole new way. For the first time in my life I realized that I was part of, not just a blood family, but also a **faith** family. I saw that this was what my parents were trying to express to me – that faith in Jesus isn't just a private affair. Faith always has something to do with others. It is an expression of a relationship; not just with a 'spiritual' Jesus, but a very 'flesh and blood' Jesus who walks and lives among his people today – people whom I knew and talked with and could see and touch.

Suddenly the phrase 'body of Christ' came alive to me. That's who we were... not just a bunch of 'bodies', but together we were HIS body! United with Jesus in the Holy Spirit we were his living presence in the world today. Soon after this realization I can remember going to Mass and seeing a whole thing in a different light. The Eucharist had begun to make sense to me...'

Approaching the Topic

How does one speak about a great mystery of faith like the Eucharist? Our topic in this leaflet holds a particular challenge! We begin with the words of a 22 year old Catholic woman who initially struggled with the practice of going to Mass and receiving the Eucharist each Sunday. Yet, like so many Catholics all over the world, through the gift of faith, she came to experience it as a source of life.

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Making sense of the Mass

Have you ever been part of a big family gathering where all sorts of characters get together: youngsters and elderly grandparents, people with joys and difficulties, successes and failures? Some members are happy to be there. Others come simply out of duty. At times the family gathers with great hurts among its members; but nonetheless they attempt to forget their differences, have a meal, talk, catch up on the news, share stories and affirm, however imperfectly, their love as a family.

The Catholic Sunday Mass is a bit like that. The assortment of characters is just as colourful and, if you look closely at the different parts of the Mass, you’ll see that they all build up our relationship as a faith family. For instance, there are parts of the Mass where we face into our need for forgiveness. We say prayers which call on God’s love and mercy and we recognise our need to reconcile with each other. There are other parts where we simply rejoice in what we are and give thanks for God’s gifts.

Sometimes at a family gathering, people will tell stories about their lives and share memories of family members who have died but who helped to shape that family into what it is today. So we remember Joe’s older brother who had a great sense of humour, granddad who built the first house in Campbell Street, and great aunt Mary who battled against all odds as an orphan.

The proclamation of God’s word at Mass is also a time of story-telling. In the scripture readings we listen to the memories and reflections of our

ancestors in faith. Their words form an enlightening backdrop to our own journey through life and lay the foundations for our beliefs and practices.

Then of course there is our Eucharistic meal, the breaking of bread and sharing of wine. Like a family meal, this is a regular source of nourishment. We **remember** the great events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we **relive** anew our sharing in his life, and we **look forward** to the promise of eternal life to come.



The unforgettable meal: the Last Supper

At the Eucharist, we remember that, shortly before his death, Jesus shared a very special meal with some of his closest friends. At this ‘last supper’, the unique love and faith that had bonded Jesus and his disciples took on an even deeper significance. There was sadness on this occasion, too. Jesus’ enemies were closing in. The disciples were struggling to grasp the full meaning of his message. They were frightened and confused. Yet in the midst of that scene Jesus declared

A Guide to the Sunday Mass

We gather as a community

In the initial part of the Mass, the **INTRODUCTORY RITES**, the faithful gather together as a community and prepare themselves to listen to God’s Word and to celebrate the Eucharist.

The **entrance song** helps to open the celebration, unite the people and lead their thoughts towards the mystery that they have come to celebrate. The priest and the whole assembly make the sign of the cross. The priest’s **greeting** and the congregation’s response affirms that the Lord is present in our midst. The priest invites the congregation into a **penitential rite** which recognises the infinite mercy of God and that we stand forever in need of God’s help and reconciliation. This part of the Mass often includes the beautiful prayer ‘Kyrie eleison’ (Lord, have mercy) which is one of the most ancient of Christian responses.

The people then sing or recite the **Gloria** which is an ancient hymn in which the Church, assembled in the Holy Spirit, praises and appeals to God the Father and the Son.

We listen to God’s Word

In the next part of the Mass, the **LITURGY OF THE WORD**, the word of God is proclaimed through the reading of the Gospel and other texts from the sacred scripture. The congregation listens and ponders the mysteries of salvation with the help of the **homily**. Through their **response to the psalms** the people make God’s word their own and through the **profession of faith** they affirm their commitment to follow it. Finally, in the **general**

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At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection; a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.

(Constitution of the Liturgy, Chap 2, no 47.)



his deepest love for them with a dramatic symbol of breaking the bread and sharing the cup of wine. He yearned to be so close to them that he left with them this special sign that his life – his very body and blood – would continue to dwell in their own hearts, minds and bodies.

The Eucharist as sacrament

So powerful was this sign, so profound was the bond of love and faith which gave the sign its meaning, that the early Christians came to recognise it as a 'sacrament'. This means that a sign then isn't just like a road sign, which points to something external to itself. The sign really is what it points to. It actually brings about or 'makes present' what it signifies. In other words, when we receive the Eucharistic bread and wine we truly receive Jesus himself and not just a memory of him. Similarly, our coming together at Mass not only reminds us that the love of Jesus is present in our midst, it actually brings about a deepening of that love in our church community. Our gathering at Mass is a response to Christ's invitation to share his self-offering and self-giving. By our union with and in Christ, we intensify our union with each other.

The Eucharist as sacrifice

Catholics have come to understand the Eucharistic celebration as a sacred offering, a sacrifice offered to God through which we receive the greatest Sacrifice of all – Jesus on the cross at Calvary. In the Mass we do not merely recall Christ's death as we do other historical events. Rather, we believe that the same Jesus who died on the cross and who rose again is present to us. When we offer ourselves to God through the Eucharistic celebration we are united with Jesus in this great mystery of his death and resurrection.

United with Christ and each other

The Eucharist is a sign of **communion** – a sign of being 'in union' with one another in Christ. To be sure, the Eucharist points to the unity which will be ours in eternal life, yet even now it is bringing about this union on earth. Sounds impossible? It would be if God wasn't somehow at work in this great mystery! But before you criticise all the so called "hypocrites" who are at Mass on Sunday but aren't living out perfect lives, don't forget to dwell on the

intercession (or **prayer of the faithful**) they make their petitions to God for the needs of the Church and for the salvation of the whole world.

We break bread and share the one cup

Having been 'nourished' at the table of God's Word, the people then proceed into the heart of the celebration of the Mass: the **LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST**. The gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar and the faithful enter into the Eucharistic prayer which comes from the ancient tradition of the Church. During this prayer, we ask the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and the wine and transform them into the body and blood of Christ. We also ask that, in receiving this sacramental presence of Jesus, the entire assembly will also be transformed more deeply as the body of Christ. The priest re-enacts the Eucharistic action of Jesus at the Last Supper when he **took** the bread (and then the wine), said the **blessing**, **broke** it and **gave** it to his disciples saying: 'take and eat (drink), for this is my body (and blood) which is given for you'.

Before receiving holy communion, the faithful are asked to offer one another a **sign of peace**. By this action we affirm our belonging to one another and any need for reconciliation as we prepare to receive the greatest sign and source of our unity as the body of Christ.

We go forth to others

The final **CONCLUDING RITE** is understood as a commissioning. Renewed in our relationship as Christ's Church, we are sent forth to share the grace of the Eucharist with others in the world. In fact, the term 'Mass' is derived from the Latin word 'missa' which means sending forth.

Tips for participating in the Mass

• Go with someone you love

Having a friend or family member beside us sensitises us to the Eucharist as a call to unity. Similarly, make the effort to reach out and get to know people. Talk to people after Mass.

• Enter personally into the prayers

Bring your own life and relationships into the prayers and hymns. e.g. Where there are prayers of praise, thank God for all the gifts that enrich your life.

• Pitch in and help

Bring your own life and relationships into the prayers and hymns. e.g. Where there are prayers of praise, thank God for all the gifts that enrich your life.

• Bring your brokenness

Since the Eucharist is a source of healing, allow God to touch your hurts and fears. Forgive and be forgiven.

• Prepare for the weekly readings

Try reflecting on the scripture readings in advance. If there is something you don't understand, ask someone or refer to a scripture commentary. Better still, read the scripture **with** someone.

• Increase your knowledge

If you are someone who likes to stretch your brain, do a bit of background reading about the Mass; e.g. how it evolved, what it all means. Don't settle for a superficial understanding of what is profound stuff!

tremendous examples of commitment and fidelity which are present in the people at Mass! Think of the man who is consistently loving to his family, knowing he has cancer. Or the teenage girl who has just been dumped by her boyfriend, but who continues to approach life with enthusiasm. Or the single mother who just lost her job, but refuses to despair. Or the priests who receives little feedback for his efforts, but continues to commit himself wholeheartedly to his parishioners. Mixed in with our weaknesses are qualities of goodness and strength which are living examples of the communion to which the Eucharist calls us.

St Augustine had a great way of looking at it. He suggested that when we receive the Eucharist we should say a double 'Amen'. 'Amen' (Yes!) I do believe that this is not just a piece of bread but the body of Christ and 'Amen' (Yes!) I do believe that this is not just a bunch of people but the body of Christ.

The dream and the reality

Of course, Catholics will be the first to admit that we still need to improve our Eucharistic celebrations. Our ideals are high, but in our humanity we often fall short. If there is no sharing of our lives at Mass and outside Mass, then yes, the Eucharist is bound to appear irrelevant! The Mass is a weekly 'nudge' that calls us to comfort the man with cancer, pray for the girl who has lost her boyfriend, help find a job for the woman who has been retrenched, show our appreciation for the tireless work of our priest. In other words, the Eucharist calls us to be deeply involved in one another's lives.

If we see the Eucharist as a big vitamin pill for our own private spiritual health, or go to Mass locked in our own little world, then we misunderstand it. That would be like family members eating dinner in different rooms! Receiving the Eucharist is not just a private act of faith. It is a public sign of commitment to our relationship with one another as Christ's body. That's why St Augustine's line is such a good reminder!

Your Story

Think About It

Have you ever been to a Catholic Mass? Who did you go with? Why were you there? What reactions did you experience?

Talk It Over

Anna's story speaks from the heart. Try voicing your own feelings about:

- sharing life with others;
- being committed to someone;
- believing in something beyond your comprehension;

In light of these thoughts, what is your inner reaction to the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist?



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