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LESSON ONE*A PRIVILEGED ENCOUNTER*

“It ought to be possible for any serious Catholic to understand the Mass or anything of our faith at depth without being a theologian. God wouldn’t set it up that way.”¹ – Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB



INTRODUCTION

Catholics today are inarguably better educated than at any time in the history of the Church. If at one time only priests and religious were capable of reading Scripture or the great theologians and Fathers of the Church, while the people in the pews found their greatest instruction via stained glass depictions of our story rendered in glorious bursts of color, those days are over. Nowadays many Catholics in attendance at our local parishes will, like their priests, hold advanced degrees in their particular field of study.

Expertise and credentials abound in Western society in the twenty-first century, but ask these educated Catholics what is happening at the Mass, and the answer will often surprise and may sometimes dishearten. Some will respond that Catholics are gathering in order to “be Church” or “be Community” together, and they are not wholly wrong, but they’re not wholly right, either. Others will say they are “sharing a meal,” which is also partly right.

Too many, however, will tell you that they are making “a symbolic remembrance of the Last Supper,” which is dead wrong and may be why, as Bishop Robert Barron relates in this first portion of his discourse on the Mass, only “20 to 25 percent” of Catholics in the United States attend Mass on Sunday. If Catholics believe the Mass is just a meal, or a memorial, it makes sense that they’re staying away. Who bothers to worship what they perceive to be a lifeless idea, one flowing passively along (as G.K. Chesterton noted) within the steady stream of other dead things?



WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING ONE AMONG THE DEAD?

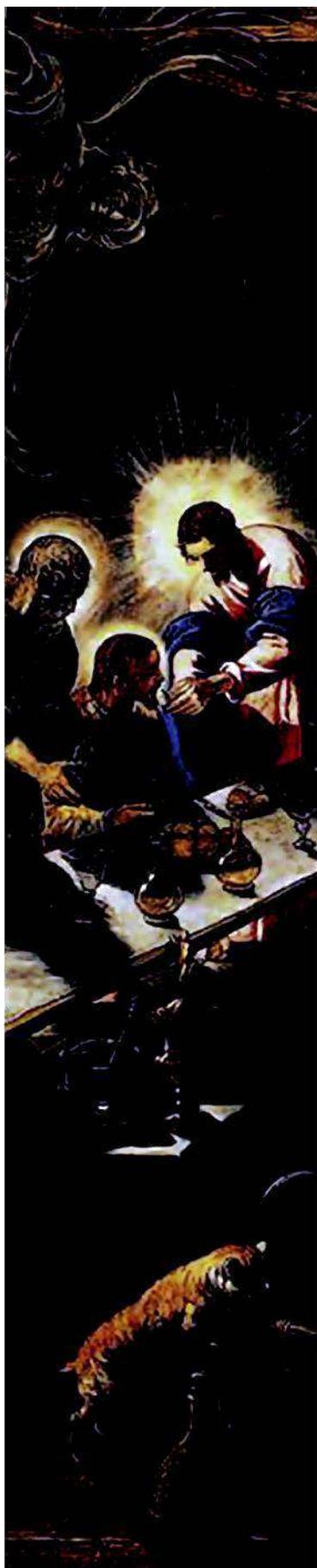
- Luke 24:5

Human beings cautiously avoid what is dead; we gravitate toward what we know to be responsive, active, and vibrantly alive. We enthusiastically gather before what we recognize as a living beauty in whatever form that takes—a chamber group in a subway, a national park, hip-hop dancers on a street corner. We will expend great energy and expense to place ourselves before the Grand Canyon, or to visit the greatest cities—Paris and Rome, Vienna and Venice—and when we get there, we linger in wonderment, and even a measure of reverence, before all of that beauty, all the pulsating life before us.

Something similar happens to Catholics once they come to understand that nothing is more thoroughly, dazzlingly alive than Jesus Christ, and that his True Presence is effected for our worship, our adoration, our counsel, and our spiritual sustenance through the Liturgy of the Mass, which is itself no moribund exercise but rather a continual prayer moving from time zone to time zone—a “sacrifice of praise” connected with all creation—that brings about the most intense and intimate encounter with Jesus Christ possible on this side of eternity.

Our low attendance numbers at Mass convincingly suggest that too few Catholics understand this truth; if they did, they would be with us week after week. They would be participating in what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council called “source and summit of the Christian life” and accepting the Living and Present Christ—from whom “all life, all holiness” proceeds, into their very veins and marrow.

The great Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor famously responded to Mary McCarthy’s childhood idea that the Holy Eucharist is a symbol (albeit a positive one) by saying “Well, if it’s a symbol, then to hell with it.”² She added that the Reality of the Eucharist was “the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.”



We do not consider our lives expendable for a symbol, nor do we conform ourselves to a discipline for a symbol, or inconvenience ourselves for a symbol (and the obligation to attend Mass can sometimes be a genuine inconvenience for a young mother or a struggling caretaker). It is always an undeniable *reality* that causes us to move outside of ourselves or extend ourselves beyond what is easy. A soldier trains for war, and risks death, not for a flag but for the living human and socio-political reality that exists behind it. A parent works multiple jobs not for a childish drawing hanging on a cubicle wall, but for the real, beloved human being who created it. Just so, the Christian martyrs, from St. Stephen and the Apostles through today, have surrendered their lives, not for an insufficient representation of something real, but for Reality itself: the constant Reality of Jesus Christ and the intimate, intense, and privileged communion that is accomplished through the Mass.

Shortly before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke at the 2005 funeral of Luigi Giussani, the founder of the renewal movement, Communion and Liberation, and there the future pontiff spelled it out. He said, “Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas, or a moralism. Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story, an event.”³

Nowhere is that encounter purer and more concentrated than within the Mass, where the veil that separates heaven from earth becomes its thinnest. Particularly at the moment of Consecration, the web is dissolved and Christ becomes fully Present among us.

A broad misunderstanding of what is happening at Mass has shaped several generations of Catholics unwilling to expend energy for the sake of what they think is just “a meal” or “a gathering” among mostly-strangers, or a dead symbology. Our absent friends and family, poorly instructed in the worship that is their inheritance, seem to be saying, “Well, if it’s just a symbol...” and their leave-taking echoes from every empty pew. For whatever reason, a majority of people who call themselves Catholic have lost sight of the gift freely given—this deep and true encounter with Christ, which is the highest purpose of the Mass. We are watching young Catholic couples marrying on beaches and in catering venues because they have no sense of sacrament, and no understanding of the powerful effect the Presence of Christ can have upon their marriage as they speak their vows. They’re not bothering to baptize their infants because the unending relationship with Christ, which begins with that action, is renewed with each Eucharistic encounter, and strengthens a person’s life through sacramental grace, is something unknown to them. The significance is not obvious, nor understood, and so it is being left behind.

This series is meant to help counter those misunderstandings and help the People of God minister to their sisters and brothers—both those who are away and those who remain in the pews but are not always sure why—by giving them the tools and encouragement needed to take on the necessary, and necessarily humbling, deeply exciting work of the New Evangelization. It is



intended to help any Catholic give confident witness to the value of the sacramental life in Christ, the freedom that is found therein, and the spiritual gifts that come when they exercise the priesthood of the laity bestowed upon them at the moment of their own baptisms, through their involvement in the Mass.



MYSTERY, PARTICIPATION, & PLAY

The Mass is a series of mysteries that build upon each other, Bishop Barron tells us, beginning with the Procession, which reflects the very creation of the universe. Just as in the beginning creatures and beings were called forth by God’s own Word, we are called forth into participation with this full-on *mysterion*. As God said, “Let there be light,” the procession begins with candles aflame; incense follows, an action acknowledging the great veil between heaven and earth. Creatures come forward, culminating in the appearance of a humanity created in God’s own image. Finally the priest or bishop, *in persona Christi capitis*, enters. There is music—voices united in praise, not for the creatures, but for the “the Lord, the King of Creation.” We step out of the ordinary concerns of our lives and gain access to the Divine Realities that are opening up before us. The encounter begins, and our participation is required.

In emphasizing the *mysterion* within the Mass, the need for our participation—most urgently insisted upon by the Council Fathers—and Romano Guardini’s notion of the Mass as our “play,” which we’ll explore a bit further, Bishop Barron makes plain how the Mass, when rightly understood, appeals to those fundamental aspects of our human natures that remain constant within us for all our lives:

- The curiosity that cannot resist a mystery
- The instinct to gather and join whatever is happening before us
- The need for play, by which we are refreshed



WHO DOESN'T LOVE A MYSTERY ?

“Mystery is a concrete ‘something’ that when you bump into it, puts you in contact with a Divine Reality.” – Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB⁴

The great Curé d’Ars, Saint John Vianney, insisted that, “If we really understood the Mass, we would die of joy” (attributed). That we are not dropping like flies at Mass, more than bears witness to the fact that we do not fully “understand” the Mass, and if we ever think we do, then we need to immediately abandon that thought and begin again, because in truth the Mass is unfathomable in its depths, as unknowable as the Mind of God.

What we do comprehend of the Mass, however, is already wonderful enough that we should be able to take away both joy and consolation from our attendance and participation.

The Mass is where we truly encounter the mystical veil, and there we find it at its most permeable—as the place where Heaven and Earth meet—where, as the psalmist wrote,

Love and truth will meet;
Justice and peace will kiss.
Truth will spring from the earth;
Justice will look down from heaven. (Ps 85:11–12)

In fact, the Mass is where the kiss and courtship between Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church—started at the Christ’s Nativity—finds its consummation. On Calvary, when his own blood sealed the covenantal marriage, Jesus pronounced it complete by saying, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Pope Benedict XVI expressed it this way in his “Love Letter” of Lent 2007 (“Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2007”)⁵ :

On the Cross, God’s eros for us is made manifest. Eros is indeed, as Pseudo-Dionysius expresses it, that force which “does not allow the lover to re-main in himself but moves him to become one with the beloved” (*De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, 13: PG 3, 712). Is there more “mad eros” (N. Cabasilas, *Vita in Cristo*, 648) than that which led the Son of God to make himself one with us even to the point of suffering as his own the consequences of our offences?



Dear brothers and sisters, let us look at Christ pierced on the cross! He is the unsurpassing revelation of God’s love, a love in which eros and agape, far from being opposed, enlighten each other. On the cross, it is God himself who begs the love of his creature: he is thirsty for the love of every one of us.

This is a great mystery, as every expression of God’s love is, at its depths, so much fuller, so much more meaningful, than we can ever guess. Every covenant between God and humanity has been a blood covenant, and the Divine Marriage between the Bridegroom and Bride is no different.

This consummation, this completeness of union that is effected within the Liturgy and by the reception of the Holy Eucharist, is part of Christ’s great promise of staggering mystery—the promise of Eternal life, with and within him:

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.
(John 14:19–20)

The constant encounter between God’s ever-present “yes” and the “no” of sinful humanity demands this eros. God’s eternal “yes” that formed and sustains creation is often met with our “no” due to the effects of Original Sin. It demands, finally, a comprehension that God meant to woo us and to have us—to be one with us—all along, as our most intimate provider and companion, but always with our consent.



THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION OF CONSENT

In its document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council urged the laity toward “...fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.”⁶ Our participation at Mass is the means by which we give our consent to become espoused to Christ and members of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Recall the words of Pope Benedict XVI: our redemption by Christ, and his ongoing relationship with us, is actually “a love story”—truly, the greatest love story ever told. As with any love story, the *dénouement*—the completion of the courtship and transition into an ongoing and fruitful union—is arrived at by the full participation of both parties. There is a progression that begins with the Liturgy of the Word—with greetings of mutual esteem and united pleas for enlightenment, guidance, and wisdom.

Then, there is a dialogue that becomes a meeting of the minds as voices unite in affirmation, thanksgiving and praise, in psalmody, and in a shared statement of belief. There is a common song—a tribute that joins all creatures together, both on earth and in heaven, as we echo the songs of the angels, “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus.”

“The heavens open up, and multitudes of angels come to assist in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass,” taught Saint Gregory the Great.⁷

There is silence, too. Thomas Merton wrote that “For language to have meaning, there must be intervals of silence...”⁸ Silence, according to Merton, is where we hear God’s mercy.⁹

Within the Mass, a shared silence is both comfortable and expectant, and it usually comes before the great call-and-response that, as Bishop Barron points out, is so much part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The call of the priest or bishop is the call of Christ, and our response is the consent necessary “that we might be brought together in love, united as one.”

It is during this portion of the liturgy that our participation brings us into the moment of Consecration—that thinning of the veil by which Christ becomes fully Present among us. It is a moment so profoundly real that it is very nearly palpable; even the babbling babies seem to sense it and go quiet in this moment of deep welcome and exquisite adoration. As Bishop Barron explains, the word adoration is rooted in the Latin “ad ora” or “to the mouth of.” We are, so to speak, mouth-to-mouth with God, as intimate as a kiss or a shared breath.

This is where our attitude of worship becomes changed, in a small but important way, as our participation moves from “doing” to the “being” that Saint John Paul said was essential: “We must understand that in order ‘to do,’ we must first learn ‘to be,’ that is to say, in the sweet company of Jesus in adoration.”¹⁰

The insistence of the Council fathers that the laity fully and consciously participate in the Mass is meant, finally, to bring us here—to this place of “being”—where there is nothing left to “do” except to learn to “be” in the midst of this great and cosmic mystery.



In the earliest years of the post-conciliar Church there was a great deal to discuss, clarify, and explore—many questions about what the documents spelled out or left up to interpretation, and in what sort of spirit they were to be read and taken. It is understandable, then, that amid all of that busy-ness, a particular emphasis was placed on lay participation, which manifested as ministries within the parts and prayers of the Mass—the ministries of music, of greeting, of reading, and of the Eucharist, both within the Mass and to the sick and the homebound.

This manner of participation is of course valid and valuable, and those who feel called to serve in such ways hopefully have the opportunity to do so, but the greater part of our participation at Mass is undertaking the challenging work of “being.”

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IS IT EASIER TO DO,
OR TO BE?

In Chapter 10 of Luke’s Gospel, we watch two sisters, Martha and Mary, encounter Jesus after he has arrived to spend time with them and their friends and family—not unlike the reality of the Mass at Consecration. Martha’s involvement with Christ is a busy one: she is serving, ordering, directing, and probably catching snatches of conversation as she moves about. Some young parents at Mass might understandably identify.

Mary’s participation, on the other hand, is characterized by quiet and extreme attentiveness: she is seated at the feet of the Lord, focused on his words and his presence. Martha becomes resentful of her sister’s seeming privilege. She approaches Jesus with what she obviously considers a plea for justice: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me” (Luke 10:40).

Jesus beckons her to take a shot at “being” for a little while. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her” (Luke 10:41-42).

How often have we been part of a family gathering—a wedding or a birthday party, or even a much-needed vacation—and found ourselves so busy that at the event’s conclusion we’ve felt as though we’d missed it, that important moments got by us because we hadn’t put down the serving trays or the video camera long enough to simply “be” a part of it and appreciate our company and the chance to “be” together?

The serving and the cleaning and the keeping up are important—the “doing” part of participation must occur if there is to be a celebration at all—but without a little time for “being” within all of that, we risk the gathering turning into a meaningless blur.

Similarly at Mass, we all must take part in the “doing”—someone must read the Scriptures or lead the chants and songs; we all must say the prayers, make the responses, and ensure that what needs to be done within the liturgy is, in fact, accomplished. But the fullest part of our participation—what Christ Jesus called “the better part”—requires that one also find a point to simply sit back and “be” before the One who is now Present. When one is before I AM, one has nothing else to do but to be. It is at this moment, notes Bishop Barron, we become most ourselves: “Gathered together as members of his Mystical Body, ordered together in right praise. The Mass is what effects that moment, which is why it is the source and summit of the Christian life, and we’re meant fully, consciously, and actively to participate in it.”

Dialogue and silence; pleas and declarations; the shared call-and-response between lover and beloved; Holy Communion: all these are the participatory actions prescribed by the Council Fathers.

Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.” –*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 14

Indeed, Communion with Christ in the Holy Eucharist confirms our royal priesthood, as the Body and Blood of the King and High Priest moves within our own veins and sinews.



THE MASS AS PLAY

Given the fascinating background on the Mass as the supreme form of worship,—the “rightly ordered” worship toward which all of Scripture and Tradition seeks to orient us, it might seem surprising for Bishop Barron to conclude his remarks by reflecting on a notion expressed by the



renowned twentieth-century priest, Romano Guardini, a philosopher whose books have frequently been quoted in modern papal writings (most recently by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*). Guardini's thoughts might seem almost counterintuitive to what we have been taught to think about faith and the work of worship. Guardini says it is not work at all. Rather, the liturgy and the Mass are “the supreme form of play.”

One can be excused for needing a moment in order to wrap one's head around the notion of “Mass as play,” particularly if one has endured a few difficult liturgies. In the end, though, this is simply another way to address the tension between Martha and Mary, between “doing” and “being.” Guardini's point is sound. “The true object of all human life is play,” wrote G.K. Chesterton. “Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground.”¹¹

When we look at the accomplishments of missionaries like Matteo Ricci, St. Francis Xavier, St. Teresa of Calcutta, or Mother Cabrini, it's easy to focus on the institutions they established, or the number of people they brought into the Church by creating opportunities for an encounter with Christ. However, the saints would tell us that whatever work they undertook was informed and supported by right worship, by the “play” of liturgy and the Mass—the greatest prayer. As St. Jane Frances de Chantal wrote to her spiritual daughters of the Visitation order, “Hold your eyes on God and leave the *doing* to him. That is all the *doing* you have to worry about” (emphasis added).¹²

Work is a means to an end, the thing we do in order to pay the bills or accumulate the means by which we may do other things for the sake of ourselves: art for the sake of art, baseball for the sake of a pleasant pastime, worship for the sake of itself. We find our freedom in the things we do with no thought to utility, which is why our work may make us wealthy, but our play is what makes life worth living. Play, therefore, has the higher value. “The Mass,” notes Bishop Barron, “is the most useless thing we can do, and by that I mean it's the highest thing we can do.”

Children seem to instinctively grasp the importance of ceremonials and play, and how taking part in such action permits them to be included in what, though not fully fathomable to them now, will be a reality in their future. A tea party must include the ceremony of dressing up, of laying out the place settings. The dialogue of inquiry and consent—“Cream and sugar?” “Just

sugar, thank you!”—primes them for more meaningful and more lasting exchanges, even within this framework of freedom and autonomy.

It is just so with the Mass, except that the reality of a heavenly future is made more tantalizingly comprehensible thanks to the Reality of Christ, brought into our lives through the liturgy, taking us beyond our education, beyond our credentials, beyond our wildest imaginings.

To me, nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overcoming as the Mass.... It is not a mere form of words—it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth. It is, not the invocation merely, but, if I dare use the word, the evocation of the Eternal.¹³ —Bl. John Henry Newman

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. How do the two main parts of the Mass—the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist—relate to how friends gather? How do they reflect the model of Christian worship? (Acts 2:42, 46-47; Luke 24:13-35; CCC 1346-1347)
2. Why is the Mass the closest thing to heaven on this side of eternity? (CCC 1324, 1326, 1419; John 6:51, 54, 56; Rev 1:4-6, 4:8, 7:9-17, 8:3-4, 19:5-9, 21:22)
3. Name some of the mysteries contained in the Mass. (CCC 1067, 1374; Eph 5:21-27, 32)
4. What does it mean that the priest acts *in persona Christi capitis*? (CCC 1142, 1348, 1548)
5. Why is lay participation in the Mass so important and what does it signify? (Acts 1:8; Eph 4:11-16; CCC 1083)

