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LESSON TWO

CALLED OUT OF THE WORLD

“Ceremonies may be shadows, but they are the shadows of great truth, and it is essential that they should be carried out with the greatest possible attention.” 1

– Saint Vincent de Paul

Benedictine monastics, both monks and nuns, like to tell the following joke: One morning, while heading to prayer in the dark, an old monk trips on his way to choir (the area of the monastic chapel where religious chant and pray the Liturgy of the Hours). He falls down the stairs and dies. Approaching Heaven, he asks Saint Peter what happened. Peter says,

“You fell down the stairs.”

“Did it hurt?” the monk asks.

“Nah,” Peter shakes his head. “You broke your neck and died instantly.”

“Well, good,” says the monk. “If you can’t have a martyrdom, then that’s the next best thing, right?”

Peter, remembering that he hadn’t particularly enjoyed his martyrdom, says, “I suppose.”

“So, what do I do, now?” The monk asks.

Saint Peter shrugs. “Go to choir.”

The point of the joke is that for a monastic, whose “work” is to pray the psalms and canticles of the Divine Office throughout the day and evening, nothing much changes between life on earth and life in eternity. A daily engagement with liturgical praise, worship, and prayerful supplication for others simply goes on, from one place to the next.

Most of us may not think much of the joke, but monastics love it because for them, as the saying goes, “It’s funny because it’s true.” Their lives have periods of work and recreation, and mundane



matters do arise, of course. But the largest part of their lives is lived within liturgy, and liturgy brings us into a kind of communion with heaven. This is true within the Liturgy of the Mass, too, as we'll see as we begin to explore what is happening in the Mass.



BEGIN AS YOU MEAN TO CONTINUE

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the nineteenth-century preacher of the English Particular Baptist church, famously said, “Begin as you mean to go on, and go on as you began, and let the Lord be all in all to you.”²

He clearly was not thinking about a Catholic liturgy at the time, but “begin as you mean to continue” is nevertheless good advice for us. If we want to get the most out of Sunday Mass through our participation, it is vitally important that we consciously *make that our intention*, and then take responsibility for being mentally and spiritually prepared for the liturgy, even before we find a parking space or a pew.

It's difficult, especially if we are parents or caretakers, and there are other, less organized people to bundle up and bring along, but it's not impossible. We can all ask our guardian angels to help our preparations by prompting us to organization, timeliness, and quieter behavior. As St. John Vianney is widely believed to have exclaimed, “How happy is that guardian angel who accompanies a soul to Holy Mass!”

Timothy O'Malley, director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy, writes of shepherding his young family to Mass this way: “Our very first act of worship at Mass occurs before we enter that assembly. Rather, the moment that we as a family reorient our entire day to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ's body, we have already offered ourselves to God.”³

He is absolutely right. Still, there are small things we can do to further our preparation. We can as easily drive to church with the radio off as on, and the ensuing calm can give a family the opportunity to share prayer intentions. If we can get into a pew five or ten minutes before the processional hymn begins, we can invest some time in mentally quieting down with a few deep

breaths, and some silence before the tabernacle. We can perhaps light a candle for a friend in need and say a prayer for the souls in purgatory. Even better, we can say a prayer for the celebrant and the ministers of the upcoming Mass that their own minds and hearts are prepared for worship.

In this way, we can “begin as we mean to continue” throughout the Mass—with a sense of thoughtful stillness and spiritual generosity that primes us to participate in an hour unlike any other of our week.

We know that a successful marriage does not start sometime after the vows, but well before the bridal march ever begins; a successful college experience starts before the high school diplomas are given out. It is the same for the Mass, and that’s why our interior preparation beforehand really matters, and really enhances everything that comes next.

In the mystery of gathering, says Bishop Barron, Mass “begins before it begins, in the way we gather....The very way we gather for Mass is conveying something very powerful.”



CALLED OUT OF THE WORLD

The Greek word *ekklesia* is where we find the root of our church and ecclesiastic reference, and it tells us what is extraordinary about what we are about to experience—that we have been “called out of one community into another, called out of one way of being, into another,” says Bishop Barron. And this is scriptural, for in 1 Peter 2:9 we are reminded that we are “a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The Church has been “called out” of what is ugly or full of sin, and into a new realm, or Kingdom—a world of good order—where love, forgiveness, and non-violence reign.

This is what God has always desired for us and made available for us—a “space of new creation.” In a sense there is a continuum here; in ancient days, when the world had become enslaved to disorder, God instructed Noah to build the ark where, as Bishop Barron relates, “a microcosm of God’s good order” was preserved amid the destruction. The Covenant with Noah was made and preserved with the construction of the ark, and the preservation of that good order.

Likewise, we see God providing that “space of new creation” through the Immaculate Conception of Mary; her pristine, sinless womb is the Ark of the New Covenant.



Again, a “space of new creation” was provided in the upper room, in which the disciples of Jesus, along with Mary, remained after the Crucifixion of Christ, until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. Immediately, they spilled out into the streets—“sent forth out,” as it were—to build up the Body of Christ.

We might ponder how every week at Mass, we are—in a small sense—gathered in that upper room again with Mary and the rest. Recall that before Pentecost the Apostles had encountered the Risen Lord in mystery and wonder—they had even broken bread with him—but they had still felt the need to remove themselves from the world, to be “called out” from the ordinary, and brought together in the upper room. They were still in need of the spiritual gift of the Spirit that would equip them to *be* Church.

We too have encountered the Lord in past days, yet we are ever-needful. We too are “called out” of the ordinary and gathered in this space—a space of sacrifice and sacrament; of baptism and confirmation; of marriage and of Eucharist; of meal and holy healing—where we are again immersed in the supernatural mystery and Reality of God, and then sent forth to be Christ, to be his Church to the world, as though we are in a perpetual Pentecost.

All of that can sound pretty heady, but it’s true, and we can trust that what we are called to do we are equipped to do through the gifts of the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit.



WE STAND TOGETHER

“One of the good things about a Catholic church is that it isn’t respectable. You can find anyone in it, from duchesses to whores, from tramps to kings.”⁴

– Rumer Godden, *In This House of Brede*

If we are tempted to think too well of ourselves for making it to Mass (and even having managed a little advance preparation for it), we can remember that we really are just like the Apostles, who always had to contend with their own fallen, flawed, and faulty humanity—and their simple differences of background and experience—even as they spread

the Good News. When, as Bishop Barron related, Christopher Dawson's mother regretted his entry into the Church, it was because he would thereafter have to "worship with the help"—those lesser people! Her exclusivist view reflected a long pedigree of classist, man-made distinctions present even at the time of Christ. Invited by the Apostle Philip to meet Jesus, Nathaniel's first response was to huff, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46)

Even though we may have little in common with the person in the next pew, we become equals within the assembly of the Mass. Our shared weaknesses are actually a great strength, a great leveler, within the church, because in recognizing our frailties we become better able to tolerate the failings of others as we work together toward the same end. We also are reminded of our total dependence on God as "without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

There is a great story about a Benedictine nun who was asked by a journalist whether she was surprised that God had chosen her for a life of prayer and holiness. "Yes," she replied, "but not nearly as surprised as that he should have chosen some of the others. But then, God's not as fastidious as we are."

We are so disparate that sometimes it can be difficult to believe that our assembly at Mass represents a microcosm of God's good order, and yet somehow, within the procession and the singing of the opening hymn, that is what we become.



THE CLOUD AND GLORY OF UNKNOWING

Interestingly, in those moments we are almost immediately thrust heavenward as the priest and ministers come forth bearing flame, incense, and the Word. It's a scene right out of Revelation 8:3-4:

Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel.

Here, says Bishop Barron, the "play of Adoration comes to mind," as Christ, represented by the priest or bishop, is "leading his mystical body in the right praise of the Father and thereby gathering all creation together, as it is supposed to be."



And we are gathered under a cloud—a “cloud of unknowing”—the incense rising all around us has the effect of momentarily obscuring our vision, and sometimes our breathing, as we permit mystery to overtake us. There comes a fuzziness both sensory and intellectual as, for the briefest of times, we see “indistinctly, as in a mirror” (1 Cor 13:12).

Generally, we don’t like fuzziness; we humans like everything to be clear, distinct, and direct; we feel cheated and suspicious when answers and effects are not fast-coming. But the fog of incense *lingers*—it wafts away slowly, still hanging in the air, evident in its fragrance long after it has been released from the thurible. It is one more sign that we are in a new and different place, where nothing is “as usual” for society or, for that matter, on earth.

Perhaps one unintended consequence of the Mass is that our ancient immersion into mystery, and our use of these disorienting tools within it, has inadvertently frustrated the modern drive for immediate clarity (and the pretense of immediate understanding) that has become the product of our instant-information age. Some of us can still recall the pre-satellite limitations of communications technology. Our radios and televisions would experience a signal fade and voices would weaken or become scrambled between channels and rendered unintelligible. Atmospheric skips could blur transmissions until a radio became unusable. Back then, these circumstances actually aligned, in a way, with our experiences of life. Knowledge was not always communicated or comprehended, and sometimes, we just had to be patient within the unknowing.

That was an important perception for us to possess. The ability to forebear a little unknowing in our lives helped us to extrapolate further and to expand on our abilities to live within the fog. It helped us to exercise the substantial muscle of belief in “what is hoped for” (Heb 11.1), which would support us in challenging circumstances, as when wartime letters were not always swift to the hand, or a bad diagnosis meant a long uncertainty.

That’s no longer the case. For several generations, the experience of wandering in wonder is all but unknown. We have become accustomed to having every question answered quickly, if not always adequately, with just a few taps of a keyboard, and have come away from our screens believing we’ve “got it” and we understand! We know stuff! We have knowledge!

And then the Church invites us to worship and we are exposed to the notion that some things are not immediately knowable, including God and, truthfully, ourselves. “One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego,” Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*, adding, “the self is more distant than any star.”⁵

Not only that, we are urged to think of all this mystery as a good thing, worthy of a slow, lifelong pursuit for something finer than simple knowledge, that being wisdom, as dispensed by its very author, who is the All in All.

Having tethered ourselves to instrumentation and placed great value upon the ready acquisition of information our devices can provide, we feel a little unmoored and insecure as we are exposed to another reality, one that does not confuse knowledge with understanding, and insists on gaining wisdom through the action, the sharing, and the accrual of love. What a strange thing is this space of new creation and its glistening fog!

So, there is cloudiness and then cleansing; there is a rising of our prayers to heaven, an overlaying of mystery and (if we are lucky) awe. All of that brings a sense of wonder to the liturgy, right from the start, and-to paraphrase St. Gregory of Nyssa, “Wonder leads to knowing.”



OUR SENSES ARE ENGAGED

Catholic writer and evangelist Scott Hahn said that after attending a Byzantine Catholic liturgy as a Presbyterian minister, he was asked what he thought by a seminarian. He responded, “Now I know why God gave me a body: to worship the Lord with his people in liturgy.”⁶

Besides silence and attention, doing and being, our full participation in the Mass demands the engagement of all of our senses, and in these first moments of the Mass, this engagement has begun; we’ve risen; we have raised our voices in song; our sense of smell has been delighted with the ancient fragrance of mysticism; our vision has been temporally blurred. Eventually we will—in ways both metaphorical and physical—“taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:9). But right now we are going to take further vocal and physical action with our communal prayer—Pope Benedict XVI called the Mass “the greatest and highest act of prayer”⁷—by marking our bodies with the Sign of the Cross, and speaking the Trinitarian formula: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”



We are proclaiming ourselves claimed via our baptism, and “marked” as belonging to Christ. This is a seemingly small matter, but it is massively important because by this action we make it clear that what follows is done not in our own names, but is an action begun and sustained by the Triune God. We do this communally because this prayer, this Mass, belongs to all of us who are baptized and sealed by Christ.

The action of crossing ourselves—the movement of our hands, first to the head, then to the stomach, then to both shoulders (traversing over the heart)—forms something like the shape of a key by which we open ourselves to that exchange with God that we call prayer. It is like a great unlocking, opening up the heart and mind to everything that is about to come, and to the community, too.

After this, the shepherd makes a formal and scriptural greeting to the flock. If the celebrant is a priest, he will say, “The Lord be with you.” A bishop, reflecting “the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders as conferred by episcopal consecration” (CCC 1557), will instead echo Christ’s words to the Apostles after his Resurrection: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19).

Addressed by priest or bishop—both of whom are operating *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ, the head of the mystical body), the congregation’s response is the same: “And with your spirit,” words by which Bishop Barron tells us, we are “awakening that deepest part of the priest, where he is ordained for this work.” We are calling out Christ in the priest, saying “be Jesus as priest” for us now.



PENANCE, PRAISE AND SUPPLICATION

Multiple times each day, before they engage in prayer, Muslims will perform a ritual ablution or washing called *Wudu*. Jewish ablutions, meanwhile, can take two forms: a full-body immersion (called a *tevilah*) or a simple handwashing (*netilat yadayim*). Within a Catholic Mass there are multiple points of ablution that occur throughout the liturgy, each taking a different form.

The first actually happens with the casting forth of incense, which not only lifts our prayer to heaven, and momentarily veils our perception, but cleanses the area of what has come before—any leftover accrual of spiritual energy that may be lingering in our worship space from previous prayers, activities, or irreverences.



THE PENITENTIAL RITE

The *second* cleansing activity comes after the greeting between celebrant and congregation, as we call to mind our sins and spiritual failures. We engage in what Bishop Barron calls a “lovely sort of liturgical stammering” by asking three times for the mercy of the Lord. It is the only part of the Mass that—even in its Latin form—uses Greek as we pray:

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

Christe eleison.

Christ, have mercy.

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

We are indeed asking here for the mercy of God, and we do it three times because God is a Trinity, and because we are, in humility, saying something deeper than “I’m sorry,” and seeking a mercy of particular richness and healing. The book *Orthodox Worship* describes it this way:

The word mercy in English is the translation of the Greek word *eleos*. This word has the same ultimate root as the old Greek word for oil, or more precisely, olive oil; a substance which was used extensively as a soothing agent for bruises and minor wounds. The oil was poured onto the wound and gently massaged in, thus soothing, comforting and making whole the injured part. The Hebrew word which is also translated as *eleos* and mercy is *hesed*, and means steadfast love. The Greek words for ‘Lord, have mercy,’ are ‘Kyrie, eleison’ that is to say, ‘Lord, soothe me, comfort me, take away my pain, show me your steadfast love.’ Thus mercy does not refer so much to justice or acquittal, a very Western interpretation, but to the infinite loving-kindness of God, and his compassion for his suffering children!⁸



This is a beautiful and profound picture of the interaction between each of us, as supplicant, and the work of God our Consoler and Healer, whom so many popes and saints have characterized as a True Parent. But since we are a Western Church, possessing some of those Western sensibilities alluded to above, we might as well note here that the cleansing action of the Penitential Rite does serve justice. It releases us from our venial sins as the priest or bishop blesses the congregation and pronounces a formula of absolution: “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” We once again make the Sign of the Cross over ourselves, and respond, “Amen.”

At this point, it seems entirely natural and logical that we would, as a congregation, blossom into a song of pure praise to the Triune God, and that is exactly what we do as the priest intones the *Gloria*.



PRAISE

“Glory to God in the highest,” he says, to which we respond, “And on earth peace to people of good will” It is, says Bishop Barron, a declaration of why we are here. “When I adore God, God is of highest worth to me. I’m not worshipping creatures in any way. I’m saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest’—an expression of humility and right praise from which only peace can resound ‘in me and around me.’”

The Gloria is, in a sense, the renewal of a baseline recognition: now that we have been cleansed and consoled, we are making a privileged announcement to the world and to each other as we state our whole reason for reaching out to God in all things: God is Good! God is Peace! God is King and Father, to whom we willingly give our worship, our thanks and praise. God is the Christ—the Redeemer, Lord, and Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world, exquisite in mercy and seated with the Father. God is the Holy Spirit who glorifies and magnifies all of creation, including us insofar as we allow him to!

The Gloria is also a proclamation of how we mean to try to live, in relation to both God and our neighbors. It is, says Bishop Barron, “the great song of the

ekklesia” which has been called out of the fallen world into a world of love, forgiveness, peace, and nonviolence.



SUPPLICATION

All of this has happened within a very short period of time, particularly if the music is limited. The Mass up to this point has already been a rich and meaningful engagement of sensuality, both grounded and transcendent, yet it has only just begun. We are about to set forth on a journey of word and action that will culminate in a sacramental event and Communion that has only ever happened once on Earth, but happens eternally nonetheless.

In order to start down that path, the priest tidies up everything we have done to this point in the “Collect,” where he literally brings everything together—from the procession to the greetings, from the *Kyrie* to the cleansing, to the heady praise—into a simple prayer of summation that permits us to conclude the Introductory Rite and move forward. While using different words at each Mass, it always is a prayer by which we praise God, we thankfully acknowledge some great thing that he has already done, and then—because there is no end to God’s generosity, and we know it—we ask him to do something great for us again.

“Which, indeed, he will,” notes Bishop Barron, “when the very Body and Blood of Christ is offered for our consumption.”

*Mysteries in religion are measured by the proud according to their own capacity; by the humble, according to the power of God: the humble glorify God for them, the proud exalt themselves against them.*⁹ – Blessed John Henry Newman

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What does *ekklesia* mean? What are we called out of and what are we called into? (CCC 751-752)
2. What does the entrance procession symbolize? Give examples of specific parts of the procession, including candles, incense, and the priest, and what they represent. (CCC 1186, 1189, 1566)
3. What does making the Sign of the Cross and speaking its associated words mean? (Matt 28:18-20; Rev 14:1; CCC 2157, 2159)
4. What does singing the opening hymn accomplish? How does it link us to heaven? (CCC 1156-1157; Rev 14:2-4, 15:2-4)
5. What does the congregation's response to the priest, "and with your Spirit," mean? (CCC 1548-1550, 1587; 2 Tim 4:22)
6. What particular acts of cleansing happen during the Introductory Rite? (Luke 17:12-14; Matt 20:30-31; 1 John 1:8-9; CCC 1432)

