

The Spirituality of the Holy Mass: Extraordinary and Ordinary Form

At every celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, be it in the Ordinary Form (OF) or the Extraordinary Form (EF), during the Eucharistic Prayer; we leave the realm of time and space and open a window on eternity. This is particularly evident in the EF as the priest moves from side to side at the altar. This is meant to represent the Transfiguration (Mt. 17/1-8; Mk 9/1-7; Lk 9/28-36) In this account Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up onto Mount Tabor. Thus, our altar and tabernacle are in a higher place to represent the mountain. This high place in eternity (outside of space and time) also represents Mount Zion, the Mount of Olives, and Mount Calvary. The Epistle is read from the right hand side of the altar as we face the tabernacle, because Elias (Elijah) was on the left of the Lord as they looked toward the apostles. Most of the Epistle readings are taken from St. Paul, and are located near the end of the Bible as they represent the fulfillment of the revelation of the Prophets of the Old Testament in the New Testament. Jesus was in the middle and is represented by the tabernacle (his actual presence) and the life size Crucifix [our most profound human image representing God's immense love and sacrifice to save us] (sadly enough we cannot complete this symbolism as we don't have one). Then the priest moves to the left side of the altar to read the Gospel of Jesus which is the fulfillment of the law originally given by Moses.

The apostles could see Moses, Elias and Jesus and could see that they were talking but could not hear what they were saying. So we have times in the EF where the Priest prays in a barely audible voice. There are also times in the OF when the priest must say prayers in a barely audible voice for this reason, there are just not as many.

The EF is always said "Ad Orientem" (facing the East) , and that is why most Catholic churches are built with the high altar at the east end of the Church, and we call the day of the Lord's resurrection EASTer. We face the east because that is the direction from which the risen Lord will come back to us at his second coming (parousia). The priest is not an entertainer, he is not on a stage, he leading the eucharistic celebration as the head of the Mystical Body of Christ. This is what we call an eschatological symbolism. We are the people of God looking east and traveling east into infinity through time awaiting the return of Our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of all time. This journey implies a great struggle against evil and fatigue, and thus we are called the Militant Church. In the proper and traditional architecture of our churches, the folks in the pews are arranged as if in two ranks marching behind their priest who is leading them to eternity and the definitive encounter with Jesus. Thus the participative action of the laity is much more evident as we all face the same direction. It helps us to overcome the temptation to passivity, like we are in an auditorium awaiting to be entertained. It also helps us to enter into the fullness of the mystery and eternity as the configuration of the congregation is open to eternity. When the priest faces the people they form a closed circle; eternity is blocked out, and then thoughts and hopes of eternal salvation get blocked out and worldly (mundane) concerns dominate [is the air conditioner on? I can't hear. I wish that kid would shut-up. I don't like this priests' personality, he is not entertaining. The music isn't good enough etc.). This has even given arise to a counterfeit theology of the Mass which has become very widespread in which we are just commemorating a meal, the last supper. So we need to gather around the table. This is like reducing a football field to just one yard long and pack in 22 players and tell them to play the game. As you probably have also noticed over the last 50 years or so this has given rise to a false architecture in our churches removing the centrality of Christ and replacing him with a plain and stark table.

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We come to Mass to participate in the Eternal Holy Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. We do this by preparing ourselves. We offer up our good deeds, and sacrifices placing them spiritually on the paten (the small golden plate the host is on) and using the power of priesthood granted to me in the Sacrament of Baptism; we offer them together with the host and the wine to the Father with the Priest. The laity is conformed to the body of Christ and the priest by the graces of his ordination (the sacrament of Holy Orders) is conformed to the head of that body and leads the offering like a general marching at the front of his army. This is the most honored, important, and valuable participation that we can have at the Holy Mass. The other physical interventions (like being lector, EMHC, altar boy, usher etc.) can actually distract us from this principle participation greatly diminish the graces we receive at the Holy Mass. Thus the people who perform these ministries are truly ministers in the sense that they serve us doing double duty, performing certain physical duties while trying to maintain themselves recollected so as to make a proper offering to the Lord. Remember what Our Blessed Lord said, “Mary has chosen the better part”, as she sat at his feet and listened attentively while Martha was running around doing things.

After the offertory of the Mass comes the Eucharistic prayer and we begin to see the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ being reenacted in a bloodless way through the gestures and movements of the priest and altar boys. Just after the resurrection we may go forward (if truly worthy without the stain of mortal sin on our souls) and receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ under the species of bread and wine. Just as the bread and wine are converted into Our Blessed Lord’s body and blood, so our good deeds and sacrifices which we have offered are converted into grace (which we will now receive as we receive the Blessed Sacrament/Holy Communion) and merits for our salvation. This is the principle thing we are doing at Mass, and as long as the priest says the proper words and makes the appropriate gestures (sadly enough many these days do not in the OF) then I am able to participate without hindrance, obstacles, or distractions and receive all the graces God intends for me. So it doesn’t matter who the priest is or what he looks like, or what he sounds like, it just matters that he is properly ordained and does to the best of his ability what God has revealed through the Church for our salvation. So when a priest begins to “ad lib” at the Mass skip certain gestures add others that are not part of the true Mass, he disfigures Christ. He becomes a shut door on eternity instead of an open window, he obstaculizes our encounter with the Lord interjecting his own character, imagination, and personality between us and the Lord. In the next installment concerning the Mass we will go a little deeper into the words and gestures of the offering of the sacrifice.