

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Introductory Rites #9

For most of us who regularly celebrate Eucharist together Sunday after Sunday, it seems only natural to us that, if we are on time, Mass will begin when the presider and minor ministers begin the entrance procession or when the leader of song gestures to us to rise for the gathering song.

However, if we wait for the gathering song and procession to begin, we may already have missed some important moments which could gradually lead us into the formal part of the celebration of the Eucharist. In a sense, Mass begins before it begins. It begins, for instance, if we have put the Sunday morning paper aside and spent a few moments reflecting on the scriptures assigned for the day.

Even rising a bit early so that we can arrive at church before the appointed hour will mean we are less stressed out and prepared to enter into the sacred rites with a calm and peaceful mind. Many people also make a point of arriving early so that they can spend some moments in silence. It is sometimes the only time in the week they have for this.

Others, of a more gregarious nature, like to spend a few moments meeting friends in the foyer or the gathering space of the church. This too could be considered more than simply the opportunity to catch up on the news of the past week. It's all about acknowledging Christ in our neighbor, building Christian community. The assumption is that we have come for that very purpose, that is, to celebrate liturgy not as individuals, but as a community of Christ's brothers and sisters. So, truly, Mass does begin before it (formally) begins. It's all about being present with the proper Christian disposition or attitude. From that everything else follows naturally.

An important gesture which also precedes the entrance procession is our acknowledgement of the presence of Christ by genuflecting toward the tabernacle if the tabernacle is visible in the sanctuary or profoundly bowing (bowing from the waist) to Christ's presence symbolized in the altar table if the tabernacle is not directly present.

Even though many of us Catholics are reluctant singers, the short song rehearsal before Mass is an

appropriate time to get a sense of the theme of the day's liturgy. In short, how we gather before Mass prepares us for what is to come.

Once the entrance procession begins, the assembly stands and enters into the celebration by gathering their voices into one joyful voice in song. (This is not traveling music or a welcome song for the priest.) The mood which is set at this time can have an important impact on our experience of the rest of the liturgy. If we are unified in song we will be able to express our unity in Christ by signing ourselves with the cross.

After the priest has greeted the assembly, he invites us to recall God's mercy through an act of penitence (either the Confiteor or the *Kyrie*). On many Sundays, particularly during the Easter season, we are invited to remember our baptism in Christ through the blessing and sprinkling with holy water.

On Sundays outside of Lent and Advent, we sing the Gloria, an ancient hymn of praise. This is immediately followed with the Opening Prayer. After inviting us to pray, the priest remains silent for a few moments and then "collects" into one the prayers of the entire assembly.

So ends the Introductory Rites of the Mass. If we have entered into them with attention and devotion we will be well prepared to listen to God's word.