



# THE MASS

SPIRITUALITY  
HISTORY  
PRACTICE

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*Illustrated*



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## Introduction

**T**HE Church of God has lent its name to the churches that dot the landscape of town and country in many lands. The great Church, one, holy, catholic, apostolic; the spiritual Church, unsullied, without spot or wrinkle, which Christ purchased for himself, which is both his Bride and his Body, this Church has its embodiment in the small and large crowds of Christians who meet regularly in buildings dedicated to God and to which they have given the name of churches.

Churches come in all sizes. There is the staid little church by the village square. There is the flamboyant cathedral that stands guard over the tentacular metropolis. There is the more modest structure that serves as place of worship for urbanized zones of recent creation. Essentially, all are signs of the Church in quest of its Lord and en route to the heavenly Jerusalem. They are signs of God's permanent presence among his people.

There are churches only because there are Christians. The Christian community has need of gathering. From this need comes the special building that bears the name of the Church itself. It is a building that by its interior and exterior proclaims its purpose. This purpose is cultural, is worship.

Ask average persons where the church is and invariably they point to a building. Their first instinct is not of the invisible Church, which the building makes concrete and whose name it bears. Even the dictionary's first definition of church refers to the building. And the "practical" Catholic is perceived as one who goes to church, and goes there principally to take part in Mass or, if one prefers, in the Eucharist.

The church-as-building, where people go at least on Sunday to take part in the Eucharist, is a sign not only to the faithful, to those who have the faith and practice the human and Christian virtue of faithfulness. No, the church-as-building forms part of the mental universe of every Westerner.

Whether it be the "little church in the vale" or the more stately church in the city, it retains a peculiar charm and casts a protective shadow. This is true for people who never set foot in a church.

## Chapter 1

# The Mass in the Life of the Church

**T**HE Eucharist is the most precious legacy received from Jesus before he left “his own.” This it is because it enabled him to leave them and yet “remain with them till the end of time.” The Eucharist is more than a gift from the incarnate Word of God. It is the incarnate Word himself.

Saint Thomas Aquinas points out that the Eucharist occupies the center of the sacramental system. The whole economy of the sacraments gravitates around the Eucharist because it contains the grace that the other sacraments signify and confer. The proper effect of a sacrament is seen from what it signifies. The Eucharist signifies or is a sign of the very cause of grace, grace in the pure state, substantial grace: Christ, who is grace and cause of grace.

## The Eucharist, Cause of the Church

Contemporary theologians favor the idea that the Eucharist is cause even of the Church. Accordingly, the Eucharist brings the Church into being, builds it up, and the Church for its part celebrates the Eucharist because it has authority from Christ to do so.

The word Saint Paul uses when speaking of the Church’s growth is edification. In devotional vocabulary the word has lost much of its meaning. This is regrettable, since on close inspection it tells a great deal. The first idea is that of a construction site where a major project is taking shape, possibly a cathedral. In the spiritual sense the cathedral that rose from the ground is the Church of which Christ is the divine architect, and the edifice is the Temple of God from which mounts heavenward the repeated praise of redeemed humanity.

In his Letter to Bishops, for Holy Thursday of 1980, Pope John Paul II wrote: “The Eucharist builds up the Church. . . . The Church was founded, as the new community of the people of God, in the apostolic community of those Twelve who, at the Last Supper, became partakers of the body and blood of the Lord under the

## Laying On of Hands

To the celebrant alone pertains the laying on of hands, with its wealth of meaning. The hand of God is symbol of his sovereign, all-present power. In Old Testament language, when the hand of the Lord was with someone, the hands of the protected of God became strong with the very strength of God.

“You have placed your hand on me . . .” (Ps 138:5).

Laying hands on someone assumed various meanings. One of the most frequent was that God’s blessing was being bestowed on a given person, through a human intermediary. Jesus blessed and healed by laying his hands on people, and his disciples followed the example. The practice became a rite in the tradition of the Church, even a sacramental rite. At Mass, laying of hands over the offerings accompanies a prayer beseeching their consecration. And at the end of Mass on the occasions when the Solemn Blessing is used, the priest extends his hands over the people (as though laying hands on them) again by way of blessing.

## Singing

Singing is not a superfluity of the Mass liturgy, even though this liturgy may be celebrated without its contribution. It formed part of the Eucharistic observance from the beginning. Jesus sang Passover hymns with his apostles on the evening of Holy Thursday, and Saint Paul speaks of the spiritual hymns and canticles that Christians ought to sing. In the year 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor in which he noted that Christians “make melody to Christ as to God.” The many canticles in the Book of Revelation that the author places on the lips of the elect in heaven are of this sort.

“How I wept to hear your hymns, your canticles, the beautiful tones that echoed in your Church,” wrote Saint Augustine in the *Confessions*. “What emotion I felt! The sound of them rang in my ear, distilling the truth in my heart. A great surge of piety would come over me as tears flowed down my cheeks, but they did no good” (IX, 6).

The Church always has given priority to the sung celebration, which is a better reflection, so far as one is possible, of the liturgy celebrated in the heavenly Jerusalem. The sung celebration is