

THE CEREMONIES OF THE MASS

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EVERY Sunday of the year, perhaps every day, we assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We see the priest executing many actions at the altar, genuflecting, bowing down, washing his hands, and so on. It is generally known that the Sacrifice of the Mass is the unbloody Sacrifice of the Cross and that at the words of the Consecration, Jesus Christ, whole and entire, is truly present on the altar under the appearance of bread and wine. But what is known about the ceremonies that go to make up the Sacrifice of the Mass?

Ceremonies are as old as the race and are consonant with the nature of man, composed as he is of a visible body and an invisible soul. Just as nature compels reason to acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being, Whom we call God, so does nature dictate that some exterior ceremonial is necessary to manifest our reverence and adoration for the Maker and Creator of all the universe. Thus among all nations and peoples we find traces of some external religious cult, the outward expression of man's homage, submission and complete dependence on the Deity. In ancient times the sacrifice was the chief ceremony. Cain and Abel sacrificed to God and they were children of our first parents. Noe, after leaving the ark, offered up to God "whole burnt offerings"; Job daily offered up a holocaust for his children; Melchisedech made a sacrifice of bread and wine.

After the Israelites had been delivered from the bondage of the Egyptians, while Moses walked for forty days with the Lord, God's chosen people fell into idolatry, for they had no sacrifices or ceremonial. God, through Moses, prescribed most minutely the form of worship and all the accompanying rites and ceremonies which the Jews were henceforth to observe. A study of the impressive ceremonial of the Jewish Law is not only interesting; it is at the same time profitable since it gives us a deeper appreciation of the ceremonies of the Mass. For, imposing as were the rites and ceremonies of the tabernacle of Moses, they were all transitory types, figures and symbols of the Sacrifice of Calvary and the Mass. The lamb, sacrificed from remotest history and immolated morning and evening in the

Temple services, was but a type of the True Victim, innocent and mute, condemned to die for the sins of men.

The Mass as we have it today is the same as that said in Apostolic times. Changes have been made, it is true, but these are of minor importance or have altered the ceremonies with which the Holy Sacrifice has always been adorned. None of these ceremonies is useless or insignificant. Whether it be prescribed out of reverence for the dignity of the Blessed Sacrament or whether it be executed to teach a moral or mystical truth, each and every ceremony has a reason and a meaning. To consider the ceremonies of the Mass one by one and to give the reasons assigned for them by liturgical authors, would require several large volumes. Therefore only a few of the ceremonies have been selected and these in view of the questions asked about them by non-Catholics. From the multifarious explanations of these ceremonies offered by the authorities on the subject, we have selected a few that seem appropriate.

Why is the Mass said in Latin? In a language that is spoken, the meaning of the words changes in the course of time with daily usage. The English we use today is very much different from the English of a few centuries ago. As the Catholic Church is the guardian of unchangeable dogmas, she, in order to teach these truths, chooses a language unchanged from generation to generation. Thus the writings of St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure and all the Doctors of the Church are presented as they were written. Again the Catholic Church, not being limited to a particular race, uses a universal language, as Latin is the same in all parts of the world.

One thing among others that distinguishes the Catholic Church from all others, is the altar. From remotest times the names sacrifice and altar have been linked together, for it was always on an altar that the sacrifice was offered. Now, the Mass is a true sacrifice and even in the time of the Apostles was said on an altar, as St. Paul expressly states (I Cor., X, 16-18). In the sixteenth century, when the reformers were striving to do away with the Mass, they found it impossible to eradicate from the minds of the people the doctrine of the Eucharist as long as the altars were maintained. Consequently they abolished the altars. In the catacombs the altars were built over the tombs of Martyrs and even today it is required that portions of the relics be inclosed in the altar stone. The altar is a symbol of the Cross,

for just as Christ was sacrificed on the Cross at Calvary in a bloody manner, so on the altar at the Sacrifice of the Mass, the same Christ is offered in an unbloody manner.

Like the publican of the Gospel standing afar off, the priest, conscious of his unworthiness to perform the sacred Mystery of the Mass, stands at the foot of the altar, strikes his breast and confesses his sins. The priest at the foot of the altar symbolizes Christ, commencing His Passion at Mount Olivet. The priest bows down just as Christ was bowed down in agony in the Garden of Gethsemani.

The priest says the prayers with outstretched hands. This manner of saying prayers was a common practice in the Old Law and in Apostolic times the Christians were encouraged thus to pray by St. Paul, who writes to Timothy, "I will that men pray lifting up pure hands." (I Tim., II, 8). It was with arms outstretched on the Cross, Christ atoned for the sins of men.

After the priest has said the Epistle, the Missal is changed to the Gospel side of the altar. This symbolizes the Gospel, being taken from the Jews, who rejected Our Lord, and being given to the Gentiles. The priest says the Gospel turned a little toward the people, as in ancient times it was the custom to read the Gospel from the pulpit facing the congregation.

At the preparation of the chalice a little water is mixed with the wine. Throughout the East even in the present day this custom of weakening the wine is still observed. Among the Jews at the time of Our Lord it was a matter of etiquette, and it is quite probable that Christ observed this custom at the Last Supper. This mixing of the wine and water represents mystically the blood and water which flowed from the pierced side of Our Lord while hanging dead on the Cross.

Four times the priest washes his hands, before vesting, after the Offertory, at the post-communion and after the Mass is finished. Although the washing of hands was a ceremonial precept of the Old Law, the Pharisees carried it to excess and the Book of Sohar even declares that "he who neglects handwashing deserves to be punished here and hereafter." Concerning the washing of hands at Mass, St. Thomas says (3a, Qu. 83, art. 5, ad 1), "The washing of hands is done in the celebration of Mass out of reverence for this sacrament and this for two reasons: first, because we are not wont to handle precious objects except the hands be washed: hence it seems indecent for anyone to ap-

proach so great a sacrament with hands that are, even literally unclean. Secondly, on account of its signification, because as Dionysius says the washing of the extremities of the limbs denotes cleansing from even the smallest sins, according to John, XIII, 10, 'He that is washed needeth not but to wash his feet.' And such cleansing is required of him who approaches this sacrament; and this is denoted by the Confession which is made before the Introit of the Mass. Moreover, this was signified by the washing of the priest under the Old Law as Dionysius says. However, the Church observes this ceremony, not because it was prescribed under the Old Law, but because it is becoming in itself, and therefore instituted by the Church. Hence it is not observed in the same way as it was then: because the washing of feet is omitted and the washing of hands is observed: for this can be done more readily, and suffices for denoting perfect cleansing. For, since the hand is the organ of organs, all works are attributed to the hands: hence it is said, Ps. XXV, 6, 'I will wash my hands among the innocent.'

Five times during the Sacrifice of the Mass the priest turns toward the people. This signifies the number of times Our Lord manifested Himself on the day of His Resurrection.

The Secret Prayers are said in an inaudible voice by the priest to signify the silence of Christ during His Passion.

Just who composed the Canon of the Mass is not known but liturgical writers are agreed that it goes back to Apostolic times. The Church, justly proud of this ancient and sacred heritage, jealously guards it against the slightest innovation. It is always the same and lest from the constant repetition some thoughtless person might repeat these sacred words impiously, the Church commands that the Canon be said in silence.

The Elevation of the Sacred Host has been in practice from the very earliest days of the Church, but until the eleventh century this ceremony took place at the end of the Canon just before the Pater Noster. As a protest against Berengarius' heretical views concerning the Holy Eucharist and as a testimony of faith in the Real Presence, the Church adopted the Elevation of the Host immediately after the Consecration.

The priest breaks the Host just as Christ did at the Last Supper. In the early days of the Church the celebration of Mass and the reception of Holy Communion went by the name of "Breaking Bread," for in those days it was the custom for

all those who attended the Sacrifice of the Mass to receive the Holy Eucharist. Until the sixth century, the Sacred Host was placed in the hands of the communicants and they communicated themselves just as the Apostles had received the Blessed Sacrament at the Last Supper. The men received the Host in their bare hands but the women were required to cover their hands with a linen cloth, called the "Dominical." The faithful received Holy Communion under the forms of both bread and wine until the Council of Constance (1414), which restricted this practice to the celebrant only.

None of the ancient ceremonies of the Mass have been lost. If the Church has seen fit to discontinue some practice in the low Mass, it is at least retained in the Solemn High Mass. For example, the "Pax," or kiss of peace, was given to all the faithful until the thirteenth century, when due to abuses, this holy practice was discontinued. In the Solemn High Mass it is given to the Deacon and he in turn gives it to the ministers of the Mass and the clergy present.

There is not an action or ceremony performed in the celebration of Mass that is useless or insignificant. Hallowed by their antiquity and sacred by their symbolic meaning, they are all inseparably linked with the Sacrifice of Calvary, the Price of our Redemption.

