



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS *GENERAL AUDIENCE*

Wednesday, 20 December 2017

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to enter the vibrant heart of the Eucharistic celebration. The Mass is composed of two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy. They are so closely connected to each other that they form one single act of worship (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 56; *General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, n. 28). The celebration, introduced by several preparatory rites and concluded by others, thus forms a single body and cannot be separated, but for clarification I will try to explain its various moments, each of which is capable of touching and engaging a dimension of our humanity. One must know these holy signs in order to experience the Mass fully and to enjoy all of its beauty.

Once the people are gathered, the celebration opens with the Introductory Rites, including the Entrance of the celebrants or the celebrant, the Greeting — “The Lord be with you” or “Peace be with you” —, the Act of Penitence — “I confess”, with which we ask forgiveness for our sins —, the *Kyrie Eleison*, the Gloria Hymn and the Collect Prayer: it is called the “collect prayer”, not because the collection of offerings takes place then: it is the Collect of the prayer intentions of all peoples; and that Collect of the peoples’ intention rises to heaven as a prayer. Their purpose — that of these Introductory Rites — is “to ensure that the faithful who come together as one establish communion and dispose themselves to listen properly to God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily” (*General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, n. 46). It is not a good habit to look at your watch and say: “I am on time; I arrive after the sermon and this way I fulfil the precept”. Mass begins with the sign of the Cross, with these Introductory Rites, because there we begin to adore God as a community. And for this reason it is important to make sure you do not arrive late, but rather early, in order to prepare the heart for this rite, for this community celebration.

Normally, while the entrance hymn is sung, the priest, with the altar servers, approaches the altar

in procession, and salutes it with a bow and, in a sign of veneration, kisses it and, when there is incense, incenses it. Why? Because the altar is Christ: it is the figure of Christ. When we look at the altar, we are looking exactly at Christ. The altar is Christ. These gestures, which could pass unobserved, are highly significant, because they express from the very beginning that the Mass is an encounter of love with Christ, who, by offering his Body on the Cross, became “the Priest, the Altar and the Lamb” (cf. *Preface v of Easter*). The altar, in fact, as a symbol of Christ, is “the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist” (*General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, n. 296); and the whole community [gathers] around the altar, which is Christ, not to look at each other, but to look at Christ, because Christ is at the centre of the community; he is not distant from it.

Then there is the *sign of the Cross*. The presiding priest traces the sign on himself and all the members of the assembly do likewise, knowing that the liturgical act is performed “in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. And here I will mention another tiny subject. Have you seen how children make the sign of the Cross? They do not know what they are doing: sometimes they make a design, which is not the sign of the Cross. Please, mom and dad, grandparents, teach the children, from the beginning — from a tender age — to make the sign of the Cross properly. And explain to them that it is having Jesus’ Cross as protection. The Mass begins with the sign of the Cross. The whole prayer moves, so to speak, within the space of the Most Holy Trinity — “In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” —, which is the space of infinite communion; it has as its beginning and end the love of the Triune God, made manifest and given to us in the Cross of Christ. In fact his Paschal Mystery is the gift of the Trinity, and the Eucharist flows ever from his pierced Heart. When we make the sign of the Cross, therefore, we not only commemorate our Baptism, but affirm that the liturgical prayer is the encounter with God in Jesus Christ, who became flesh, died on the Cross and rose in glory for us.

Thus, the priest offers the *liturgical Greeting* with the expression: “The Lord be with you” or something similar — there are several; and the assembly responds: “And with your spirit”. We are in a dialogue; we are at the beginning of the Mass and we must think about the significance of all these gestures and words. We are entering a “symphony”, in which various tones of voice resonate, including moments of silence, in view of creating “harmony” among all the participants, which is to acknowledge that they are animated by a unique Spirit and for the same aim. Indeed, by the priest’s “Greeting and the people’s response, the mystery of the Church gathered together is made manifest” (*General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, n. 50). In this way we express the common faith and the mutual wish to abide with the Lord and to live in unity with the entire community.

And this is a prayerful symphony which is being created, and it immediately presents a very moving moment, because the presiding priest invites everyone to acknowledge their sins. We are all sinners. I do not know, perhaps someone among you is not a sinner.... If someone is not a sinner, raise your hand, please, so we can all see. But there are no hands raised, okay: you have

good faith! All of us are sinners; and for this reason at the start of Mass we ask forgiveness. It is the *Act of Penitence*. It

is not a matter of only thinking about the sins committed, but much more: it is the invitation to confess our sins before God and before the community, before our brothers and sisters, with humility and sincerity, like the tax collector at the Temple. If the Eucharist truly renders present the Paschal Mystery, meaning Christ's passing from death to life, then the first thing we have to do is recognize our own situation of death in order to rise again with him to new life. This helps us understand how important the Act of Penitence is. And we will return to this theme in the next catechesis.

We are going to explain the Mass step by step. But please: teach the children to make the sign of the Cross properly, please!

Special greetings:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, particularly the student groups from Australia and the United States of America. In these final days before our celebration of Christmas, I invoke upon you and your families the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I would like to thank the Cuban Circus for this beautiful show! Thank you!

I offer a special greeting to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may you prepare for the mystery of the Nativity of the Lord with the obedience of faith and humility that Mary had. May you, dear *sick people*, draw from her that same strength of love of Jesus, who comes among us. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, contemplate the example of the Holy Family of Bethlehem, in order to practice the same virtues on your journey of family life.

And after the blessing, I would like to hear this choir that sings so well!