



Catholic Answers

# WHY GO TO MASS?

---

**When Catholics understand what the Mass is, going becomes less an obligation and more a joy.**

It is offered both at weddings and funerals. In most places, it is available every day. But on Sunday, it is an obligation to attend.

We are speaking of what Catholics call the Mass, AKA the Eucharist or the Divine Liturgy. For Catholics, there is no other religious service more important. But the majority of baptized Catholics around the

world simply don't see the need to attend. In France, there are more Muslims going to mosques on Friday that there are Catholics going to Mass on Sunday. In the U.S., at least according to one prediction, only about 12 percent of Catholics will regularly attend Sunday Mass in the next couple of years.



Of those who don't, the majority still believe that God exists, that Jesus is his Son, and that there is an obligation to give thanks. Some, remembering the truth of the Catechism that God is everywhere, don't see why they can't pray to God in private at home or wherever they are, whenever they want. Others see the value of going to church on Sunday but find the preaching, music, and programs better at a nearby Protestant church. With regard to Mass, they say they just don't get much out of it. If we want to see these people come back to the table of the Lord, we can't merely quote Scripture and Church documents at them to prove they ought to go. The best approach, really, is to make them want to go. And the best way to do this is to be able to show how Mass offers a unique opportunity to encounter God that is not available anywhere else.

Instinctively, those who believe in God know that they owe him worship. After all, we've received everything from him. So we ought to give him thanks and offer him a pleasing sacrifice.

**The question is, what sort of sacrifice pleases him? How can we adequately thank the Lord for what he has given us?**

**Scripture is clear:** There is no sacrifice worthy of the name except the one sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross. Hebrews 10:12 says that Christ "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins." That sacrifice cannot be repeated. The Mass is not an additional sacrifice or a repetition of Christ's sacrifice; rather, it is a re-presentation of the one sacrifice of the cross.

Because Christ was a unique human being, the sacrifice he offered on the cross once and for all is a unique act. He was a human being, so it was an act that took place in history and is therefore past. He is God, who



is outside time and lives in the eternal present. Past and future are always present to him. This means that the actions of Christ on Calvary and on Easter Sunday morning are eternal acts that can be made present again by the power of the Spirit.

This is what happens in the Eucharist. The power of Calvary—the sacrifice that takes away sins, heals, and transforms—becomes present and available to us. It can be applied to our need.

But that's not all. The cross is incomplete without the Resurrection. You can't understand what happened on Good Friday apart from what happened two days later on Easter Sunday. The Resurrection, too, is made present every time the Eucharist is celebrated. When we go to Mass, we are mysteriously present at the foot of the cross, watching the Savior give his life for us. And we're also standing outside the open tomb with the women who greeted the risen Jesus. "This is for you. I give my life to you," Jesus is saying at every Mass. "Receive my power."

Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice in order to bring us salvation and give us his spirit. Pentecost is the fruit of the sacrifice of the cross and the victory of the Resurrection. Thus, the Church teaches that every Mass is a new Pentecost, a new opportunity to receive the Spirit afresh (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 739).

To sum up, the Mass is Christ's sacrifice made present again. It's not recalled, as if it had been absent or was merely a past event. It's re-presented. And so when we go to Mass, we are connected to the life-giving power of these saving events that have the power to make all things new. And we are offering to the Father the only sacrifice that could possibly please him: the perfect offering of his perfect Son. But it is our offering as well, since the Son has generously made us members of his body.



It is true that God is present everywhere, including when we pray to him alone or when two or three of us gather in his name. However, in the Eucharist, there are at least four extraordinary ways that the Lord Jesus is present that transcend the ways he is present outside the liturgy of the Catholic Church.

First, Christ is present in the community. Even when it's hard to see Christ in our fellow Mass-goers, he's really there. People gather from various places; some of them are distracted and preoccupied. As they come into that church, though, they're no longer just scattered individuals but members of Christ's body. At Mass we deepen our communion not only with Christ, but with the whole Church, including the saints and our beloved deceased.

Second, Christ is present at Mass in the person of the priest. Some Catholic priests are astounding in holiness and powerful in their preaching. Others are not. The good news is that Christ's presence doesn't depend on the priest's personal virtue. Christ makes himself present through a unique charism the priest has been given through the sacrament of holy orders. This is one of the reasons the Catholic priest wears vestments when he celebrates the Eucharist: it signifies that he's acting in the person of Christ (in persona Christi), not in his own person. The ordained priest is an icon of Christ, the true Priest. Through him, Jesus makes his priesthood present in a very special way.

Third, the Lord is present in the Eucharist in the Word of God. Some describe Protestant

groups as the churches of the Bible and the Catholic Church as the church of ritual. This is certainly not the case.

The Catholic Church sees the word of God as a tremendous gift, and this understanding is reflected in the Eucharist. The first part of the Sunday Mass centers on readings from Scripture: one passage from the Old Testament, a psalm response, another passage from the New Testament, and then the Gospel. These readings are arranged so that Sunday Mass-goers hear the most important passages from the entire Bible over the course of three years. It is a comprehensive and ongoing Bible study. But this liturgy of the word isn't a corporate catechism lesson intended to present abstract doctrine. Through the readings the Lord wants to speak to us personally, penetrating to the depths of our hearts with a nourishing, challenging word that draws us to conversion. This has happened time and time again in the Church's history. Francis di Bernardone, the son of a cloth merchant in Assisi, walked into a church one day during a period when he was searching for meaning in life. He opened the lectionary to this passage: "Go, sell what you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me" (see Mark 10:21). Francis knew that this word wasn't just for the apostles 1,200 years earlier; it was for him, right there and then. He walked out of the church, did exactly what that Scripture passage said, and so began a worldwide spiritual revolution whose impact is felt to this day.

This is how the Lord wants to work in our lives, and we can cooperate by cultivating

openness to the words we hear at Mass. It's not just at the table of the Eucharist that we're nourished. The pulpit is like a table, too, as the Second Vatican Council explains:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy (Dei Verbum, 21).

We read Scripture first because it builds up our faith. Christ is present in it, preparing us to discern the Real Presence of his body and blood under the signs of bread and wine.

In addition to the readings, the word of God comes to us through the prayers of the Mass. Listen carefully, and you'll discover that these prayers are almost entirely scriptural. They're either direct quotes or paraphrases, like the

Creed, which the Church Fathers put together as a summary of the essential Scripture passages.

Take the greeting that the priest usually gives us when he walks in: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." That's a direct quote from St. Paul: 2 Corinthians 13:14. Or the Gloria that we pray most Sundays: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth." That's Luke 2:14. At every Mass we sing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might." That's Isaiah 6:3. What about "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world"? That's what John the Baptist said (John 1:29). And then there's the centurion who told the Lord he wasn't worthy to welcome him under his roof (see Matt. 8:8). We quote him every time we pray before Communion, "Lord, I am not worthy . . ." Through the readings and the







prayers of the Mass, we are immersed in God's word.

The final and most special way that the Lord is present in the Eucharist is in his body and blood, present to us under the signs of bread and wine.

Jesus is God, and so he is omnipresent. But Jesus is now and forever man as well as God; his humanity can't be present everywhere in the same way as his divinity. Jesus' glorified humanity is at the right hand of the Father. In the Eucharist, and only in the Eucharist, he makes his body and blood present to us in a real way. This is why the sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood is so extraordinary. In all of the other sacraments, Jesus gives us his grace, says St. Thomas Aquinas, whereas in the Eucharist, the "sacrament of sacraments," he gives us his whole self, his divinity and his humanity. How is this possible? The transformation

of the bread and wine happens the same way Mary's virginal conception did: through the power of the word and the power of the Spirit. The incarnation may seem impossible, yet all Christians believe it. It is accomplished the same way creation was: God spoke, and the world was made out of nothing through the power of the word and the Spirit. Likewise, in the Eucharist, the one who said, "Let there be light" says, "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Through the power of the Spirit invoked upon the gifts, the awesome change takes place. About the year 1200, as some Catholics were struggling to find a way to explain this change, they came up with the word transubstantiation. Many people struggle with this word today. One reason we find it hard to understand is that the word substance has different meanings. For us, substance is something you can touch. Substance abuse has to do with tangibles like drugs and alcohol.

In theology, though, substance means something that underlies what you can see and touch. It's the essence of the thing that resides under its appearances. Surface characteristics, on the other hand—accidents, as theologians call them—have to do with everything that could be otherwise—say, how long your hair is or how fat or thin you are. Transubstantiation, therefore, means that while the bread and wine look the same on the surface, their underlying essence is changed. This is the opposite of what happens in the world, where appearances change while the essence stays the same. (Getting a haircut or gaining five pounds isn't going to affect the essence of who I am.)

In the Eucharist, though, the underlying, invisible substance is transformed from bread and wine to Christ's body and blood. Everything looks the same as before. Even with a microscope, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference, for the level at which this change happens is far too deep for human probing. But in the Eucharist, Christ is as truly present in his body, blood, soul, and divinity as when he walked the roads of Galilee, healing and preaching.

The Eucharist is a meal. It's the Lord's Supper as well as a holy sacrifice. Christ becomes present so we can not only see him under the appearances of bread and wine, but also receive him into ourselves. Tangibly, he becomes our food.

### BUT WHY BREAD AND WINE?

Bread is our basic daily nourishment. The Our Father's "give us this day our daily bread" is a petition for all our needs and necessities. The Fathers of the Church also understood it as a prayer for the spiritual nourishment we need on a daily basis—the Eucharist and the word of God.



Wine is the blood of the grape. We can appreciate the significance of this only if we understand the meaning of blood in the Old Testament. There, blood is equated with life. It's not seen as sustaining life—rather, for the Jew, blood is life, and it belongs to God. It's for this reason that the Mosaic law forbids drinking blood or eating any animal that still has blood in it. Even today, Jews who keep a kosher table eat only animals that have been appropriately butchered and drained of all blood.

In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us a share in God's divine life by giving us his own blood. His plan for us goes way beyond making us into decent folks who have gotten rid of gross immorality. Jesus came so that we might share in everything he has and become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

What is this divine nature? Essentially, it's the inner life of the Trinity: three persons eternally pouring themselves out in self-giving love for each other. This is agape, or charity, and drinking Jesus' blood gives us an opportunity to share in it so that it can become the principle and power of our own lives.

In order for us to stay alive, every cell in our body needs to be bathed with blood that nourishes, cleanses, and purifies our system. Similarly, taking the blood of Christ in Communion will bring us to full spiritual vitality. It will strengthen and cleanse our entire being—spiritually and even physically, if it be God's will.

The one we take upon our lips and into our bodies in the Eucharist is the same Jesus who raised Lazarus and healed the man born blind: the risen Lord, who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and whose kingdom will have no end.  
- Marcellino D'Ambrosio

