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Mass

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"There has always been a central focus on a shared story and a shared meal," explained Joan Workmaster, director of the Diocese of Rochester's Office of Liturgy. "Around these two central issues we have elaborated or pared away, depending on the social conditions."

The catechism observes that the two great parts of Mass are: "the gathering, the Liturgy of the Word, with readings, homily and general intercessions"; and "the Liturgy of the Eucharist, with the presentation of the bread and wine, the consecratory thanksgiving, and communion."

Although the essentials have remained the same, post-Vatican II reforms did make some changes in the Mass. But changes have aimed at recapturing the essence of the Mass as it existed in the early church, noted Joe Skeffington, a staff member at the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions.

"Essentially, the Second Vatican Council said 'Let's reform the liturgy by returning to its earliest sources,'" said Skeffington from FDLC's Washington, D.C. offices.

Moreover, he observed, the post-Vatican II reforms are actually a continuation of what was attempted at the Council of Trent (1545-63) — which produced the Tridentine Mass celebrated in Roman Catholic churches until the early 1970s.

The goal of Trent was to create a uniform service to replace the wide variations in the way the Mass was being celebrated, Skeffington observed.

But the council fathers at Trent did not have access to some of the documents of the early church that were rediscovered only in the 20th century — documents that helped to guide the post-Vatican II reform of the liturgy, Workmaster said.

"We were able to see what were the essential issues that were focused on by the early communities," she said.

This examination of the early services also helped to show that the liturgy called for all people — not just the priest — to be actively involved, noted Msgr. Alan F. Detscher, executive director of the Secretariat for Liturgy at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Indeed, the monsignor said, the word

liturgy itself means, "the people's work." It's the action of the people. At the same time Christ is acting, too."

But the church had gradually moved away from this understanding of the liturgy, with the priest becoming the primary actor, and the people, in a sense, becoming the audience, the monsignor acknowledged. The post-Vatican II reforms restored this original shared sense of celebration.

"The underlying notion of the Second Vatican Council was the liturgy is the action of the whole church, the priest and the people," Msgr. Detscher noted. "Each has a proper role in the liturgy."

One element of the current Mass that would have been unfamiliar to the earliest Christians was the introductory — or gathering — rite, noted Lawrence J. Johnson in the 1993 edition of his book, *The Word and Eucharist Handbook*. This rite was added only gradually as the Mass moved from being a meal-like celebration held in homes to a service for growing congregations.

The introductory rite consists of a pro-

cession and entrance song, a sign of the cross, a greeting, an introduction to the liturgy, a penitential rite or Kyrie, the Glory to God, and the opening prayer.

As with many parts of the Mass, the church allows variations. The penitential rite, for example, now has three optional forms, whereas in the Tridentine service, only the confessor — which was said by the priest and not the congregation — was permitted.

The introductory rite prepares the way for the Liturgy of the Word, Johnson wrote. This consists of Scripture readings, a homily, the creed and intercessions.

This portion of the Mass was given greater emphasis in the post-Vatican II reforms. As part of these reforms, the lectionary — the Scripture readings for use at Mass — was revised. The combined Old and New Testament readings, Workmaster noted, put "us in touch with the expansive history of how God has entered our lives."

The homily, meanwhile, was given new importance under the reforms.

"That wasn't the case before," Skeffington explained. "People did preach, but the homily (now) is supposed to be related to the readings of the day. In the old canon law, to meet your Sunday obligation you had to be there by the creed. You could miss out on the readings; it wasn't considered as important."

After the lessons of the readings and the homily, "Then it's possible for us to move to the creed and say, 'Yes, I believe,'" Workmaster observed.

Currently, the Nicene Creed is the only one allowed in U.S. churches for regular Masses — the Apostles' Creed may be substituted for children's liturgies. Under proposed changes, however, either creed would be permitted.

The creed is followed by the intercessions, which, Workmaster noted, help people to apply the ideas in the Scriptures and the homily to their lives. "They allow us to see that we all have the same basic needs and problems," she said.

The process of reflecting leads into the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This part of the Mass includes the presentation of the

gifts, the prayer over the gifts, the eucharistic prayer, the Sanctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy Lord"), the memorial acclamation and the final doxology ("Great Amen").

Prior to Vatican II, the church used just one eucharistic prayer. As a result of the reforms, several different prayers may be used. But, Workmaster stated, because of their significance, the words of these prayers may not be varied.

This concluding "Great Amen" is in a sense a parallel to the creed, Workmaster observed.

"When we sing 'Amen,'" she remarked, "we are saying, 'So be it, we believe everything that has gone before.'"

The Communion rite follows. It includes the Lord's Prayer, the sign of peace, breaking of the bread, Communion and a prayer.

The sign of peace in the early Roman Mass came after the Liturgy of the Word, but was moved in the fourth century to after the Lord's Prayer, "a natural location since the gesture visually expressed the prayer's request that we be forgiven 'as we forgive those who sin against us,'" Johnson wrote. Modifications being considered by the U.S. bishops would allow returning the sign of peace to after the Liturgy of the Word.

The concluding rite of the Mass includes the blessing, the dismissal and an optional recessional song.

The Mass as we know it is still in a process of fine-tuning, Monsignor Detscher acknowledged.

For example, the sacramentary — the book containing the rites and prayers of the Mass — is being revised. The one in current use was translated from Latin into simplistic English because the focus was on making an English form available as soon as possible. A revised sacramentary being considered by the U.S. bishops, he noted, would use "a higher form of English" that would help to recapture more of the grace of the Latin text.

Any changes approved by the U.S. bishops — most likely in November — would have to be sent to Rome for ultimate approval. That process could take five or six years, the monsignor concluded.

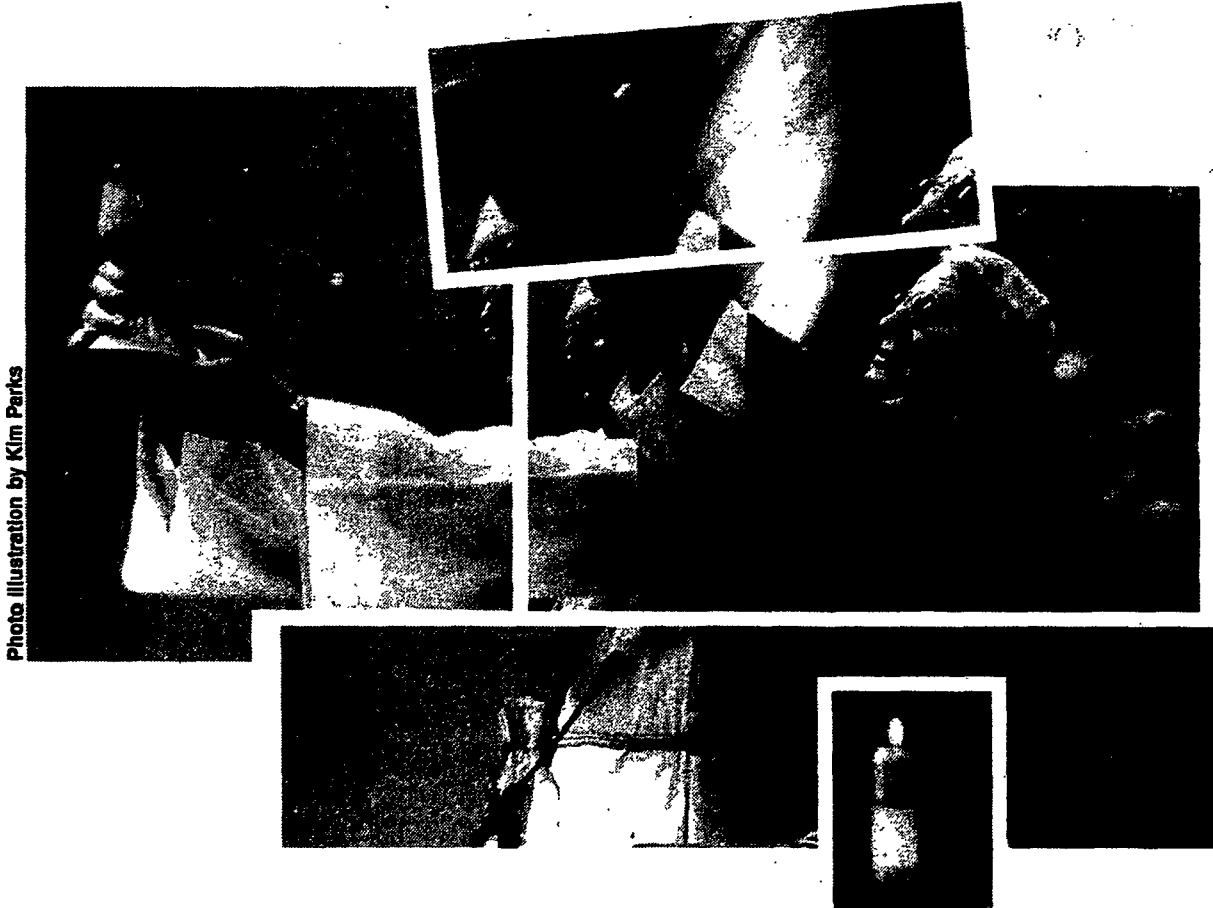


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