

First Eucharist

Session 1 – Introductory Rites

Goals and Objectives for Session One

The goal of Session one is to form and transform people into our basic Catholic identity as the Body of Christ. It is this reality that is celebrated during the Introductory Rites of the Mass.

The objectives of Session one are:

- To deepen understanding of community
- To provide an experience of community
- To understand that Christ is present when the community gathers
- To stress the importance of unity as central to our Catholic identity
- To lead people to see the Introductory Rites as liturgical actions that allow them to take on the form of a community
- To see the importance of Sunday and why we gather together EVERY Sunday as Catholics.

The Introductory Rites of the Mass

We begin our sacramental preparation for First Communion with catechesis on the Introductory Rites of the Mass. The Introductory Rites have a very important role in any liturgical celebration and especially for the celebration of the Eucharist. What we do and pray during this time identifies who we are as a community of believers. Thus, every liturgical celebration of the Church begins in the same manner with introductory rites.

The Introductory Rites of the Mass realize the Catholic understanding of how we begin our worship. They are not the same as a “Call to Worship” used in other Christian traditions, nor are they called the “Gathering Rites.” Unfortunately because our catechesis has been weak, too many people see these rites as:

- secondary or unimportant
- something to do until “latecomers” arrive
- a welcoming of the priest and/or other ministers in the procession
- a call to gather

What Does the Church Teach?

There are two very important documents that explain the meaning and purpose of the parts of the Mass. These are significant resources for catechists involved with First Communion preparation. The first is the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM). It contains the norms that are the universal law of the Church for the Latin Rite and is a source for what the Church requires for the celebration of the eucharistic liturgy. It also contains the American adaptations for the celebration of the Mass. The second is

the *Introduction to the Order of Mass* (IOM). The IOM is intended to assist in the training of liturgical ministers and especially for the formation of the faithful. Both documents provide wonderful explanations on the meaning and purpose of the parts of the Mass.

Here is what they say about the Introductory Rites of the Mass. The GIRM points out that the purpose of the 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” (46). The IOM gives a beautiful description of these rites:

In the introductory rites, Christ joins the Church to himself and gathers her children to join their voices to his perfect hymn of praise. Thus, the liturgical assembly, “where two or three come together in Christ’s name, and where he is found in their midst (see Mt 18:20), is the ‘first image that the Church gives of herself.’” Thus an important function of these rites is to enable the gathered assembly to take on the form of a community, alert and ready to listen to the Word and celebrate the sacrament. (66)

Here we see that the purpose of these rites is not so much to call us to worship and/or merely to “gather” us, but rather form us into the Body of Christ where Christ is then made present. These actions prepare us to listen to God’s Word.

When we gather every Sunday as the Body of Christ we fulfill the Lord’s command to “do this as a memorial of me” (Lk 22:19). In taking on the form of a community we realize a basic tenet of our faith. We are baptized into the Church, a community, the people of God, the Body of Christ. As Catholics, then, we are not a random group of individuals but the gathering of God’s people to exercise its royal priesthood in the sacrifice of praise. In liturgy, we transcend individualism. For this reason all of our liturgical celebrations, which are by their very nature public and communal, are organized to encourage and foster an awareness of mutual interdependence.

When we are called together in Christ, the Church is present. The risen Lord is present in the midst of the assembly, which becomes visible as the Body of Christ.

The Assembly

Within the context of liturgical celebration, we refer to this community as the “assembly.” The importance of the assembly at liturgy is emphasized in the 1978 document of our bishops entitled *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW). Here it states the following:

Among the symbols with which liturgy deals, none is more important than this assembly of believers. It is common to use the same name to speak of the building in which those persons worship, but that use is misleading. In the words of ancient Christians, the building used for worship is called *domus ecclesiae*, the house of the Church. (28)

The most powerful experience of the sacred is found in the celebration and the persons celebrating, that is, it is found in the action of the assembly: the living words, the living gestures, the living sacrifice, the living meal. (29)

There is no audience, no passive element in the liturgical celebration. This fact alone distinguishes it from most other public assemblies. (30)

The action of the assembly is also unique since it is not merely a “celebration of life,” reflecting all of the distinctions stemming from color, sex, class, etc. Quite the contrary, liturgy requires the faith community to set aside all those distinctions and divisions and classifications. By doing this the liturgy celebrates the reign of God, and as such maintains the tension between what is (the status quo of our daily lives) and what must be (God’s will for human salvation—liberation and solidarity). (32)

Dies Domini (DD): On Keeping the Lord’s Day

In 1998, Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter on the importance of Sunday entitled “On Keeping the Lord’s Day.” Here the Holy Father emphasizes the importance of our Catholic identity which is inherently communal:

It is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually and commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ inwardly, in the secrecy of their hearts. Those who have received the grace of baptism are not saved as individuals alone, but as members of the mystical body, having become part of the People of God. It is important that they come together to express fully the very identity of church, the ekklesia, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord. (31)

He also notes that in the celebration of the Eucharist two things happen. The Eucharist feeds and nourishes us through the Body and Blood of Christ. At the same time, participation in this action forms the Church. “The Eucharist feeds and forms the Church” (DD, 32). Thus, the pope points out that “The Sunday assembly is the privileged place of unity” (DD, 36).

Sunday is the primary day of unity and community. Because of this, the Holy Father states: “At Sunday Masses in parishes...it is normal to find different groups, movements, associations and even the smaller religious communities present in the parish. This allows EVERYONE to experience in common what they share most deeply....This is why on Sunday, the day of gathering, small group Masses are not to be encouraged” (DD, 36).

(Source: Linda Gaupin, Embracing the Vision: Sacramental Catechesis for First Reconciliation and First Communion)