

WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE MASS: THE PRIEST'S HIDDEN PREPARATION

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For many Catholics familiar with the Traditional Latin Mass, the opening words spoken by the priest are among the most evocative: *Introibo ad altare Dei*—I will go to the altar of God. And indeed these words should be evocative, because in that short phrase is contained the very reason for his—and our—presence at Mass. He, and he alone, is going to ascend to the altar to offer prayers to God, as Moses ascended Mount Sinai and as Elijah ascended Mount Horeb alone to commune with the Lord. Indeed, as Christ alone ascended to the altar of the Cross, the priest alone ascends to the altar *in persona Christi* to offer that same sacrifice to the Father. It is a lonely place, preparing to come face to face with the Lord; it is daring and burdensome; it is audacious. No one can enter into this lightly! Preparation is essential.

The prayers at the foot of the altar are not the beginning of the priest's preparation for Mass—we will come back to these prayers later. It should go without saying that the priest's entire life—his manner of living—should be a preparation for Mass, helping him to guard a fitting disposition for offering the Holy Sacrifice. The Irish Cistercian monk and Abbot of Roscrea Abbey, Dom Eugene Boylan (1904–1964), in his book *The Spiritual Life of the Priest* underscores this point. While noting that the value of the Mass for the Church does not depend on the dispositions of the priest, he says the following:

If a priest only knew it, his daily Mass is—as far as he is concerned—more or less a deliberate lie if he be not endeavouring to live a life of holiness...It is obvious then that as a personal sacrifice it could even be meaningless if his own life and interior sacrifice do not in some way correspond to what the Mass says.

It is the very Sacrifice which the priest offers, continues Dom Boylan, which lays upon him the “terrifying obligation” to live as Christ lived, but it is also through the fruit of the Sacrifice—Communion—that the priest receives the “strength and the means to carry it out”.

The soul of the priest must be cleansed from sin: he must be in the state of grace. We are reminded of the admonition of St Paul to the Corinthians:

...[I]f anyone eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily, he will be held to account for the Lord's body and blood. A man must examine himself first, and then eat of that bread and drink of that cup; he is eating and drinking damnation to himself if he eats and drinks unworthily, not recognizing the Lord's body for what it is. (1Cor. 11:27-29)

For both the celebration of Mass and the reception of Holy Communion the priest must be in the state of grace—a priest conscious of mortal sin must avail of sacramental confession before offering the Holy Sacrifice. In an urgent case, where the priest must offer Mass and no confessor is available, he should make an act of perfect contrition with a resolution to avail of sacramental confession as soon as possible.

The law of the Church prescribes a Eucharistic fast for both clergy and laity before the reception of Holy Communion. Current law states that a “person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine” (CIC 919.1). Fasting is, in fact, one of the oldest customs observed

in the Church with regard to the Eucharist. Tertullian (c.155–c.220) wrote about the Blessed Sacrament being received “before all other food”. St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) speaks of the Eucharistic fast being a universal custom throughout the Church—“the Sacrament is everywhere partaken of by persons fasting” (Letter 54, *To Januaris*). Further on he remarks that “for the honour of so great a sacrament... the body of the Lord should take the precedence of all other food entering the mouth of a Christian”. This was clearly echoed in the Apostolic Constitution *Christus Dominus* of Pope Pius XII in 1953: “When we receive His precious Body and Blood before we take any food, we show clearly that this is the first and loftiest nourishment by which our soul



is fed and its holiness increased". St Thomas Aquinas points out that the physical preparation for receiving the Eucharist through fasting is appropriate because we are beings with bodies as well as souls.

Of course, when we think of the priest's preparation before Mass, our minds probably go to the sacristy where the priest gets ready immediately before Mass. It is best if the priest arrives to the sacristy with plenty of time to spare—this allows him to maintain a recollected disposition, which he may not be able to keep if he is rushed or under pressure. The sacristy itself should be a place of calm and quiet, and many sacristies still have a notice on the wall: *Silentium—Silence!*

The Roman Missal includes several prayers which the priest may recite as part of his preparation in the sacristy. In the first place, are five psalms: Psalm 83 ("Lord of hosts, how I love thy dwelling-place..."), Psalm 84 ("What blessings, Lord, thou hast granted to this land of thine..."), Psalm 85 ("Turn thy ear, Lord, and listen to me in my helplessness and my need..."), Psalm 115 ("I trusted, even when most I bewailed my unhappy lot...") and Psalm 129 ("Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord..."). These psalms are followed by a series of invocations and responses. Following the psalms, there is a series of prayers—one for each day of the week—composed by Jean de Fécamp (but previously attributed to St Ambrose). In reciting these prayers, the priest asks the Lord to teach him reverence for the mystery he is about to celebrate and that he may approach the altar with a clean soul and pure heart. There are further prayers such as the *Prayer before Mass* by St Ambrose, a prayer by St Thomas Aquinas, a prayer to Our Lady, to St Joseph, to the angels and saints, and a prayer to the saint in whose honor the Mass will be celebrated. Following these prayers is a prayer composed by Pope Gregory XIII which formulates the priest's intention before offering the Holy Sacrifice.

The vesting prayers are possibly the best-known element of the priest's preparation for Mass. While the vestments may

have been purely utilitarian in their origin—being part of everyday Roman clothing—they took on a deeply symbolic and spiritual meaning as the Church retained the garments in liturgical use even after they fell into disuse in general society. The first vestment donned by the celebrant is the amice, a rectangular piece of linen, originally worn over the head. The priest kisses the cross in the center of the amice, briefly places it over his head before fastening it over the neck, while saying the following prayer: "Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil". Next, the alb—the long white linen robe recalling baptismal purity—is put on, with the accompanying prayer: "Purify me, O Lord, and cleanse my heart, so that, washed in the Blood of the Lamb, I may enjoy eternal bliss". The cincture, which traditionally symbolizes chastity, is then tied around the waist, while the priest says: "Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity, and quench in my heart the fire of concupiscence,

that the virtue of continence and chastity may abide in me". The maniple, which is like a short stole worn on the left forearm, has become symbolic of the burden of sin and of the weightiness of the priestly duties. As with the amice, the priest kisses the cross on the maniple before placing it on his arm while saying this prayer: "May I deserve, O Lord, to bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow, that I may receive the reward for my labors with rejoicing". The stole is a long strip of silk of the liturgical color of the day, which is placed



around the neck and then crossed over the chest. It represents the authority of the priestly office. As the priest puts it on, he kisses the cross, and says: "Restore unto me, O Lord, the stole of immortality, which was lost through the guilt of our first parents: and, although I am unworthy to approach Thy sacred Mysteries, nevertheless grant unto me eternal joy". Finally, the chasuble, the outer garment of the priest during the celebration of the Mass, representing the yoke of Christ and charity, is put on with the following prayer: "O Lord, Who said, "My yoke is easy and My burden light": grant that I may bear it well and follow after Thee with thanksgiving. Amen".

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What Happens Before Mass: The Priest's Hidden Preparation

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It is worth noting that a bishop, at a Solemn Pontifical Mass, prepares for Mass in a very public way. On entering the church—before he is vested—he prays before the Blessed Sacrament. After this he is vested in front of the people and by other people. The bishop—the *Sacerdos Magnus*—who entered the church wearing the *cappa magna* depends entirely on others to get him ready to offer the Holy Sacrifice. He must remain still while others approach him and dress him. This symbolizes the necessity of humility and obedience to the office—his authority is not self-generated, but comes from God through the Church.

Apart from knowing what a priest does to get ready for Mass, what use is all of this to the faithful? Very simply: practically all of the priest's preparations for offering the Sacrifice of the Mass can—and should—be adopted by the faithful. Most people know of the necessity of fasting before the reception of Holy Communion and of the importance of only receiving the Eucharist in the state of grace. However, it is also important

to unite oneself to the Mass in a recollected state. This would include ensuring that you come to the church at least a few minutes before the Mass begins. It is entirely praiseworthy, for example, to pray the psalms mentioned above and, as the priest does, to gather together your intentions for the Mass. Of course the faithful are not donning vestments, but it is worth examining one's own choice of "vestments" for Mass—are my clothes appropriate for the Sacrifice of the Mass, are they—even if very simple—the best I can wear for Sunday Mass? The general sentiments of the vesting prayers can provide, nonetheless, useful meditation for the faithful, as can those beautiful aforementioned prayers before Mass by St Ambrose and St Thomas Aquinas. Apart from this, the degree of preparation required by the priest before he even pronounces those immortal words, *Introibo ad altare Dei*, should be a reminder of the dignity and duties of the priest, and therefore a reminder to frequently pray to the Lord to sanctify your priests! ✝