

Readings

Ex 16:2-4, 12-15

Ps 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54

Eph 4:17, 20-24

Jn 6:24-35

Paul W. Galetto, O.S.A.
Church of St. Paul
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The formative years of the Mass took place within one hundred years of the resurrection. The process can best be described as organic rather than systematic; each new crisis or situation brought about a rethinking and reformation of the Eucharistic celebration.

The followers of Jesus were forced to answer several questions:

1. Are we Jewish? What does it mean to be Jewish? If not Jewish, what are we?
2. Can non-Jewish people follow Jesus?
3. Where and how do we worship God and Jesus?

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish and they did not see themselves as founding a new religion. Judaism has always been a wide tent with many variations on the theme of belief in the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The first followers of Jesus called their movement “The Way” but they were still essentially Jewish; it wasn’t until later that they became known as Christians. Most of what we know about the manner in which these people worshiped has to be pieced together from references made in the writings of the New Testament and from other texts that were written in the same period. On the Sabbath Day, which was a Saturday, it seems that these followers would continue to go to the Temple (if they were in Jerusalem) or to a local synagogue (if they were outside the city).

Before the usual sabbath prayers they would gather as a group and celebrate a meal to commemorate the Last Supper. Christians called this meal by various names but the two most common were the Breaking of the Bread and the Supper of the Lord. From the start it seems that Christians decided to celebrate the commemoration of the Last Supper weekly rather than yearly (as Jews did with the Passover). They also decided that it did not have to be celebrated only in Jerusalem as was the Jewish custom regarding Passover at the time of Jesus. They would take bread, wine and water and share this with one another. It was customary for many Jewish families to have a meal before attending services at the Temple; the early Christians adapted this custom to their needs.

The way that Christians worshiped changed with the reception of non-Jews into the faith. When Gentiles (aka Greeks) started to follow The Way this led to a rethinking of what it meant to be a Christian: Did you have to be Jewish in order to be a Christian? Two decisions made by the leaders of the followers of Jesus signaled a break with Jewish law. The first was a change in dietary laws; while the Jews banned certain foods, Christians came to believe that all foods were good and blessed by God. Secondly, since the time of Abraham all Jewish men had been circumcised. At the Council of Jerusalem in 48 A.D., the leaders of the Christians welcomed all people to follow Jesus, not just the circumcised. These were two cataclysmic shifts from traditional Judaism. It became difficult to see how Christians could claim to be Jewish.

When the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the definitive break between Christians and Jews would soon follow.

Another challenge that forced an evaluation of the way Christians worshiped was the strictures of Roman society. In the Roman world class differences were quite distinct: slaves did not mix with freedmen who did not mix with the plutocrats who did not mix with the governing

class who did not mix with the family of the emperor. The teachings of Jesus held that all people should love one another and that there should be no divisions among them – love one another. In the Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul admonishes the Christians of Corinth because they are divided rather than united. Paul writes the following:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

Paul was angry because what the Christians were doing was placing more emphasis on the meal rather than the worship. What they were doing was contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Within a relatively short period of time two major shifts took place in the way Christians worshiped. The first was that they stopped having their worship as part of a meal; it would become a separate service. Secondly, they decided that instead of worshiping on a Saturday evening which was the Jewish sabbath, they would worship on a Sunday morning to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus. This was another dramatic break from Judaism.

When the worship service was separated from the meal it seems that the first Christians fell back on what they knew – the synagogue service. The revised Christian worship would have a presider much like the leader of the synagogue. After opening prayers there would be readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. Sometime after the year 80 or 90 these readings from the Old Testament were replaced by the readings of Paul's letters and stories of Jesus that were part of an oral tradition but eventually came from a Gospel of the life of Jesus. After the readings there

would be a talk or a discussion. The next phase was prayers of blessing and thanksgiving and then the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper. After these words the breaking and distribution of the bread would take place as well as the passing of the cup.

We know the form of some of these prayers from a book that was written in the year 60 called *The Didache (The Teaching of the Apostles)*. There were probably hymns that were sung during and at the end of the liturgy. The first Christians who were living around Jerusalem would celebrate the Lord's Supper in the language that Jesus spoke – Aramaic – but as the Church expanded the Eucharist was celebrated in Greek, Latin and Coptic (Egypt). There was nothing to hold people back from understanding and participating in the liturgy. However, it must be noted that the Hebrew word, “Amen” (which means “I agree” or “So be it”) seems to have always been the response of the faithful during these liturgies.

As more and more people accepted the Christian faith, the place of worship needed to be large enough to house the community. At times finding an adequate space was complicated because Christians were being persecuted by the Roman authorities starting in 64 A.D. Homes were the usual places of worship. As this became risky Christians moved to the catacombs which were burial places in many Roman cities. As more and more Christians were martyred their tombs became places where Christians would gather to celebrate. Roman law and culture made the catacombs an ideal place for Christians to gather because they would not be harassed there. As Christians became martyrs for the faith, their tombs were dug out of the volcanic rock and then covered with a stone or marble slab. These tombs became altars of sacrifice. The presider of the Eucharist would have had his back to the worshipers. At a much later time when churches were built and altars installed, the altars would have a relic of a saint placed in the stone of the altar to commemorate how the tombs of the martyrs served as altars.

There was a Roman official, Pliny the Younger, who was charged with conducting the persecution of Christians (as well as his other tasks). In a letter that he wrote to the emperor Trajan in 114 A.D. Pliny mentions that through interrogation he has found out that the Christians worship early in the morning on a specific day of the week and that they say prayers and sing songs to Jesus. He mentions that they eat the body and drink the blood of Christ and he finds this practice immoral and disgusting and worthy of death; he must have thought of the Christians as cannibals since he did not understand the significance of what they were doing.

The first detailed description of the way that Christians worshiped was written in 150 A.D. by Justin the Martyr. Justin was a convert to Christianity and a strong defender of the faith. He sought to explain in detail what the Christians believed, how they lived and how they worshiped. From this point on the foundation of the Mass had been poured and the walls were up.

At the start of the fourth century (312 A.D.), Christianity would move out of the catacombs and the houses of the faithful and into churches. This gigantic step would bring about further reforms to the Mass.