

*Readings*

1 Kgs 19:4-8

Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Eph 4:30–5:2

Jn 6:41-51

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The third phase in the history of the Mass began with the end of the persecutions by the Roman Empire and the dramatic expansion in the number of Christians. In the first phase the Mass was, for those Proto-Christians, mostly a re-enactment of the Last Supper combined with traditional Jewish worship. The second phase was marked by a break with Judaism and a need to form an identity while fighting for survival amidst the persecutions of the Roman Empire. All that changed in 312 A.D. when Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and then again in 325 when he declared Christianity the legal religion of the empire.

Emperor Constantine credited his accession to power to Christianity. He lavished much wealth on the religion and built large churches in the city of Rome. The Christians chose the style of a basilica over that of a temple or a synagogue. Basilicas were based on ancient Roman law courts and were long rectangular buildings that had a large, rounded space at the end which was called an apse. The apse became the place for the altar and the place for the bishop to lead the service. It was Roman custom that the leader of the court (i.e., the judge) would sit while delivering judgment. The Latin word for chair is *cathedra*. This would give us the word “cathedral” meaning the place where the bishop’s chair is located. To this day, whenever the pope delivers a talk in Rome or in a church, he does it while seated. The listeners would always

stand; the invention of pews would come much later.

As the numbers of Christians rapidly grew from the ranks of pagans, these people brought with them some of their customs and these were incorporated into Christian worship. These included: kissing holy objects, genuflecting, bowing and using incense. Before the legal recognition of Christianity there were few standardized prayers. During one phase of the persecution, Christians were forbidden to have holy books; the Romans took them and destroyed them. Now that books were no longer banned, prayers became formalized and standardized and therefore less spontaneous. Every Mass would have prayers that had been approved by the bishop. Over time another change was the addition of stone altars. Previously a wooden table had served as the altar. With the change to the stone altars the understanding of the Eucharist moved from the idea of a banquet to that of a sacrifice.

The basilica had a long aisle and the entrance procession became a part of the Mass. The procession was accompanied by music with singing. Since people could not read most of the music had a simple refrain that the people could sing and repeat. This singing allowed for more participation on the part of the people. Over the course of years various parts of the Mass (such as the Gloria and the Lamb of God) would be sung as well. A style of music known as Gregorian Chant was developed.

During the time of persecution the leaders of the worship services did not wear any special clothing. However, when the persecution ended formal clothing for the main celebrant started to appear. The first was a long white tunic which became known by the Latin word for white: alb. This was a sign of civility and respect; barbarians and workers usually wore a simple garment that would go no further than their knees. On top of the alb the president would wear a

colored garment which became known as a chasuble. A stole which hung around the neck was added as a practical matter to wipe off sweat or to clean the altar. Over time these garments became sacralized and standardized as clerical clothes.

Besides the structure of the building and the practical changes that needed to be addressed, the other major influence of the time was the theological battles that were being waged. With the rapid increase in the number of Christians many people unschooled in the traditional beliefs of the Church proposed ideas and teachings that challenged established beliefs. These became known as heresies or false teachings. In a series of meetings known as Councils, the Church defined and refined what it meant to be a Christian. The major heresies of this period were four: Gnosticism, Arianism, Donatism, and Manichaeism. Gnosticism taught that the spirit is superior to the body and that anything to do with the body should be devalued. This led them to deny the Incarnation and that God had become man. Arianism was almost the opposite of Gnosticism; it held that Jesus could not be God, he was only the greatest of humans. Donatists held that anyone who denied the faith because of the Roman persecutions needed to be re-baptized. Donatists denied the power of the sacrament of confession as well as absolution and repentance. Lastly Manichaeism held that there were two distinct powers – one of good and one of evil – and that they were constantly battling each other.

The response of the Church to these four heresies shaped the preaching and the prayers of the Mass as well as the way Christians worshiped. Each major town had a bishop and it was his job to be the main teacher of the people in his charge. The bishop did this through his preaching. We have many sermons from the great men of this period and they serve as a great resource to help us understand why we believe what we believe. The Nicene Creed which was approved by

the Church in 325 AD (and was later incorporated into the Mass) helped the faithful to understand what it meant to be a Christian.

The Church developed a liturgical calendar to focus on the main feasts of Christianity. In the earliest calendars the year began with the Resurrection (Easter). Soon a preparation period for Easter was developed which we call Lent. By the middle of the fourth century, we find Christmas celebrations and shortly an adjoining time of preparation we call Advent. Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord were attached in the days after Christmas. Over the course of many years feasts of martyrs and saints were added as well as days honoring Mary.

As the communities began to grow in size and geography it became necessary to send the Eucharist into the towns or neighborhoods in the vicinity of the cathedral. At the end of the Eucharistic celebration the bishop would send the deacon into the community, and he would say, "He is dismissed" in Latin this would be *Missa est*. As people moved away from Latin and into their local languages, they mistranslated this phrase and thought the bishop was saying, "it is a Mass." That's how we got the word "Mass."

The next period in the history of the Mass takes place in the Middle Ages with the development of monasteries as well as small local churches.