

Readings

Prv 9:1-6

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

Eph 5:15-20

Jn 6:51-58

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The Mass as we know it has been shaped by many forces. In this fourth installment on the history of the Mass we look at how the events of the Middle Ages in Europe were influential in how people related to the Eucharist.

The impact of Irish monks cannot be overstated as regards their influence on the spiritual lives of Christians in Europe. These Irish monks brought with them an emphasis on the sinful nature of humanity and the need for confession and penance. It is believed that the Irish monks brought about the idea of a confessional so that people could remain anonymous while confessing their sins. This focus on the depraved nature of man, made many people feel that they were unworthy to receive communion. The host was no longer received in the hand, just on the tongue. Instead of standing people knelt to receive communion. Altar rails were installed which became both a physical and psychological barrier. Priests now prayed the Eucharistic prayers in silence since it was in Latin and fewer people understood it. Piety became individual rather than communal; prayers started with “I” rather than “We”.

Due to the focus on sinfulness, many people felt unworthy to receive communion and this led to few people ever receiving the sacrament. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council mandated that all Christians should receive communion at least once year between Easter and Trinity

Sunday.

The development of monasteries contributed to the isolation of the Eucharist from the people. In the large chapels and churches that were built to serve the needs of the monks, the altar was separated from the people by wooden stalls which were used by the monks to say their daily prayers. Monks were considered holier than the people and therefore were put closer to the altar. In these monasteries the people could not see or hear the priest as he celebrated Mass. In local churches without monks, the priest would say the Eucharistic Prayer and when the time of consecration came about – when the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ – a bell would be rung to let the people know that what was considered the most important part of the Mass was taking place. The Latin words for consecration are *Hoc est corpus meum* (which means: “This is my body”). The people, not understanding the Latin, would imitate what they heard and say, “Hocus Pocus” which overtime became a synonym for magic.

Since there were many priests and concelebration (i.e., priests celebrating the same Mass together) as we know it today did not exist, churches started to install side altars where priests could celebrate a private Mass. People would give the priest a stipend to say Mass for a special intention; over time this would lead to problems and needed reform. Many side altars became shrines to saints. This development further eroded the sense of a community celebration; there was little, if any, emotional connection to the Mass.

While devotion to the Mass had waned, the local church was still the focus of the life of the town. It is where they came to celebrate births, weddings and deaths. People would pray with their private devotions and sing hymns to express their faith in God. The church set the rhythm of life with its liturgical calendar; the celebrations of Easter and Christmas mirrored the times of the

spring equinox and the winter solstice. Church bells were the main form of time keeping and reminded people to pray at certain hours of the day.

To replace the loss of the communal sense of the Mass, people engaged in devotions to saints by honoring relics, they participated in processions of images or statues, and undertook pilgrimages to holy places. Instead of enhancing devotion to the Eucharist, these became replacements for it – a sad state of affairs!

Churches were normally built on an east-west axis; while the opening prayers were directed to the people, the Eucharistic Prayer was said facing eastward toward the rising sun to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. This meant that the priest would turn his back to the people. The symbolism is that the priest would unite the prayers of the people with his prayers and the Eucharistic prayer and present them to God. Since the people could not see the consecrated host, the priest would raise the host over his head to show it to the people. Eventually, the idea of seeing the host became important to the worshipers. Since the people were separated from participating in the Mass, their focus turned to the Eucharist itself and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was born. Displaying the host was made possible through the development of the monstrance, a devotional tool designed for this particular purpose. Over the course of time the monstrance appeared more elaborate and, at times, was adorned with precious stones and metals. By the 13th century this kind of devotion was widespread. At times adoration was preceded by a procession. This, in part, explains the origin and widespread celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi. In the liturgical calendar this feast takes place in early summer and became a time for people to put off the winter chill and celebrate in the streets and squares of their town with other members of the community.

Changes and adaptations to the Mass came to a screeching halt with the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. The Reformation was more a battle over theology rather than liturgy; theology certainly impacts liturgy but the main battles were about the role of Scripture and Tradition as well as the primacy of the pope. The theological battles were complicated by political ones as kings and princes saw an opportunity to undercut the authority of the Church. After about thirty years of turmoil, the Church responded to the threats of the Protestant Reformation by holding the Council of Trent in 1545. This Council took place over the course of eighteen years. The Council affirmed the Real Presence of the Eucharist, the divine institution of the priesthood, the seven sacraments and the primacy of the Pope. The Council also standardized the liturgy and put it in a format that became known as the Tridentine Mass; this would last for 400 years. The Roman Missal was published in 1570 and that ended all changes to the Mass. In hindsight, this was unfortunate because it did not go back to review the history of the Mass and remove from the celebration of the Mass those practices that were developed over time that distracted people from seeing the Eucharist as the focus of the Mass.

One other outcome of the Council of Trent was the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which laid out clearly the teachings of the Church. The Council realized that many of the faithful (priests included) did not really know what the position of the Church was in many areas. The Catechism became the handbook that guided the preaching of the priests. The book was divided into three sections and each section became the theme for the year; after all three sections were done, the preacher would start all over again. Sermons were rarely about the Scriptures readings of the day.

Apart from the Council, St. Philip Neri initiated a movement to reform the music sung in the Church. He developed simple tunes in the language of the people that reflected Christian

teachings. St. Philip also wanted simple melodies so that the people could understand what they were hearing and singing. This was very effective.

The last change worth noting was an architectural one. The baroque style of Church removed many of the barriers that separated the people from the celebration of the Eucharist. Art was dominant in these structures: light, marble, glass, bronze, gold and silver were employed together to teach the people. There were a proliferation of statues and devotional pieces that all served to emphasize the beliefs of the Catholic faith. At the center of the altar piece was a place for a monstrance so that adoration of the Eucharist could take place at any time. The pulpit was made to stand out in these churches because preaching was now prominent. The pulpit was placed in a location that would take advantage of the acoustics so that the faithful could hear the homily. Pews were introduced so that people could sit and listen.

From 1570 until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Latin Mass stayed basically the same throughout the Catholic world.