

Summary Guide to Participation in the Mass



How to Enter the Church Building

The fundamental insight: Sacramental signs and symbols are filled with Jesus. More than mere mental reminders, and more effective than simple pointers that direct us elsewhere, liturgical sacraments and sacramentals unite heaven and earth in the Person of Christ.

The principal activity: As you approach the main entrance—don't go in the side door!—bear in mind that you approach Christ “the door,” our access to the Father. Jesus “stands at the door and knocks” (Rev. 3:20), awaiting our entry. Let us “go within his gates, giving thanks,” and “enter his courts with songs of praise” (Ps. 100:4).

How to Make the Sign of the Cross

The fundamental insight: Mystagogy leads the attentive participant from the visible sign to the invisible reality—who is ultimately Jesus—by looking to the roots of sacramental meaning in creation, culture, the Old Testament, Christ, and heaven.

The principal activity: Make the Sign of the Cross thoughtfully, for in it we recall our creation from the hands of the Trinity and, along with the entire cosmos, our re-creation today. By this Sign we are nourished with God-given grace, as from the very tree of life in nature's original garden. Like the Chosen People under Moses' outstretched arms along their way to a Promised Land, the Cross is our standard and protection. In the Sign of the Cross we configure ourselves to Jesus and His Cross. By this sign we are transported to heaven, where we eat the fruit of the tree of life in a restored Garden.

How to Pray the Opening Prayer

The fundamental insight: The Opening Prayer requires both individual contributions—the pleas of each member of the Mystical Body—and a leader to gather them and give voice to them to God the Father. The moment of silence following the priest's invitation “Let us pray” is a time to offer our intentions to and desires for God.

The principal activity: Formulate your intentions—sentiments of adoration, sorrow, thanksgiving, and petition—before Mass. When the priest says, “Let us pray,” consciously bring these intentions forward so that he can offer them, along with everybody else's, to God.

How to Listen to the Readings

The fundamental insight: The Word of God is not simply texts spoken at Mass, but first and foremost is a Person, the Word of the Trinity. All liturgical words, in some way, make audible this divine Word. The Mass's Liturgy of the Word resembles history's larger economy of salvation: just as the Father conversed with the Chosen People through the prophets, so now does He continue the dialogue with His people in the Mass's readings.

The principal activity: In the days leading up to Sunday, follow the method of *lectio divina* for the Sunday Gospel: reading, reflecting, responding, contemplating, acting. At Mass, listen attentively with the ears of your heart. In the day or two following the Sunday hearing of the Word, recall the Gospel message and thank God for the fruits received.

How to Prepare the Heart at the Offertory

The fundamental insight: “Sacrifice,” which is at the heart of Jesus' saving work, the Mass, and the Christian life, means giving undivided love to God the Father. Gifts and offerings that truly represent the heart of the giver are the true sacrifice desired by God. The objective of the preparation of the gifts and of the altar is to place our whole selves on the altar so that we can be joined with Jesus' whole self and given to God the Father.

The principal activity: Pray the Morning Offering throughout the week, and during the preparation of the altar and the gifts at Mass, consider slowly and thoughtfully what or whom you pray for; what you are working toward in the days to come; what has brought you recent joy; and each thing large or small that causes you pain or suffering. Be specific and genuine in these considerations, and place them on the altar along with the bread and wine.

How to Participate in the Eucharistic Prayer

The fundamental insight: A priest is a bridge builder, or *pontifex*, who bridges the divide separating man from God so that we can pass over from earth to heaven. Jesus' priestly Paschal Mystery—His suffering, death, Resurrection, and Ascension—bridges the gap between fallen earth and eternal heaven: He is the *Pontifex Maximus*. Even though Christ does not need our assistance in His saving work, He makes us sharers in His priesthood at baptism, empowering us to build the Paschal bridge with Him during the Eucharistic Prayer.

The principal activity: Recalling that baptism conforms us to Jesus and His priesthood and gives to each the power to offer sacrifice, following the preparation of your heart during the offertory prayers, remember that you must join these to the sacrifice of Jesus at the priest's hands, sending them across the chasm to God the Father.

How to Receive Communion to the Fullest

The fundamental insight: "Active participation" in the Mass finds its pinnacle in the worthy reception of the Eucharist. It is the best way to participate in Jesus' saving work. Receiving the Eucharist to its fullest requires a desire to be transformed by what we eat and drink—Jesus—so that He can live in us. Humility and docility are needed.

The principal activity: Hear Jesus' words to St. Augustine: "You shall not change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into me." Imitate the faithful, humble centurion when we say, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." Pray St. Ignatius's prayer of surrender and union with God upon returning to the pew:

Receive, Lord, my entire freedom. Accept the whole of my memory, my intellect and my will. Whatever I have or possess, it was You who gave it to me; I restore it to You in full, and I surrender it completely to the guidance of Your will. Give me only love of You together with Your grace, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more. Amen.

How to Respond to the Dismissal

The fundamental insight: The Mass's dismissal formulas are commands to reenter the world and sanctify it. Analogous to an army or a field hospital, the Church does battle in a fallen world to restore it to Christ. The Mass equips the baptized to be saints so that they can struggle in the world unto victory with Christ.

The principal activity: Recall that Jesus "the door" not only welcomes us in at the start of Mass but orders us out of the church building at the end of Mass. Pray St. Francis's "Peace Prayer" slowly and meditatively as a means to translate the dismissal into daily life. Think of specific, concrete ways to apply the grace of Mass in the week ahead.

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, in dying that we are born to eternal life.