Fact Sheet: The Meaning and Ritual of Catholic Religious Services

What is the Catholic Mass?

- Catholic Mass is the celebration of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, an essential sacrament in the Catholic Church. A sacrament is an action made holy or special because of its believed ability to demonstrate a religious truth.
- The Eucharist refers to the consumption of both bread and wine, which signify the body and blood of Christ.
- Mass is important to Catholics because they believe in the “real presence” of Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist.
- Mass takes place on weekdays, but on Sundays and holy days like Easter.
- Catholics are obligated to attend mass. "Christians don't say that they 'do' or 'carry out' the Eucharist; they celebrate it.”
- Catholics attend Mass because it provides them with the opportunity to atone for their sins, worship God and connect with their community. “First, in the ‘Penitential Rite’ we acknowledge our sinfulness before God,” explains Thomas Scirghi, an associate professor of theology at Fordham, who is also a Jesuit priest. “Second, that we worship God in prayer is the meaning of the word ‘liturgy,’ i.e., the work of the people for God. Third, we worship together as a response to Jesus' prayer, ‘may they all be one.’ The liturgy is a sign of the unity of our community of saved sinners.”
- The Catholic Mass differs in some key ways from the Protestant Mass. “One fundamental difference is that Catholics believe in the ‘real presence’ of Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist, while others hold for a ‘memorial’ or remembrance of the Lord's Supper,” explains Father Scirghi.
The Four Essential Rituals of Mass

- There are four essential rituals or segments of Mass:
  - The Entrance Rite, in which Father Scirghi describes as when “the people gather for worship, marked by a procession followed by a blessing and greeting.”
  - The Liturgy of the Word in which the scriptures are proclaimed. On Sundays, Catholics hear a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm response, a reading from the New Testament epistles, and a Gospel reading. The homily (or sermon) then “opens up” the scripture passages as we apply them to our context.” On weekdays the mass begins with a recitation of the Penitential Rite, which according to US Conference of Catholic Bishops, represents “the faithful [recalling] their sins and [placing] their trust in God’s abiding mercy.”
  - The Liturgy of the Eucharist in which Father Scirghi explains, “Catholics pray, giving thanks (“Eucharist”) to God and remembering the Lord’s Supper in which he commanded his followers to ‘do this in memory of me.’”
  - The Dismissal. “More than a simple farewell, here the assembly is sent forth to carry with us the good news and grace we have received today,” says Fr. Scirghi.

What are Vespers?

- Vespers are the evening prayers and they are performed every day.
- “Evening Prayer gives thanks for the day just past and makes an evening sacrifice of praise to God,” explains the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

What Occurs During the Vespers?

Unlike Mass, Vespers are not divided into four rituals, but instead they consist of the recitation of hymns, Psalms, and prayers:

- The Vespers includes an introductory verse (Sign of the Cross).
- A hymn relevant to the occasion.
- The singing or recitation of Psalms.
- A responsory that highlights the themes of the reading.
- The gospel canticle or the “Canticle of Mary” which is recited by the congregation.
- The intercessions, which includes praying for the dead or the needs of the Church and the world.
- The Lord's prayer, which brings the intercessions to an end
- The concluding or final prayer giving praise to God
- The Dismissal or blessing of people in attendance
- Father Scirghi expects that Pope Francis' evening prayers “must include the plight of the migrants seeking refuge in Europe.”

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