

# Lesson One: A Biblical Introduction to the Mass

## Lesson Objectives

1. To understand basic Catholic beliefs about the relationship between the Bible and the Liturgy.
2. To understand the biblical basis for the Mass.
3. To understand how in the Mass, the written text of the Bible becomes Living Word.

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## I. Finding the Bible in the Mass

### A. The Biblical Way We Worship

The Mass begins where the Bible leaves off. In God's plan of salvation, the Bible and the Mass were made for each other.

That's probably news to you. In fact, if you're like a lot of people, including many Catholics, you probably haven't given much thought to the relationship between the Bible and the Mass.

In fact, if somebody asked, "What does the Bible have to do with the Mass?" many of us would probably answer, "Not much."

That seems like an obvious answer.

After all, we hear readings from the Old and New Testaments in every Mass and sing a Psalm in between. But aside from that - and maybe the homily which is based on the readings - it doesn't seem like the Bible plays a big part in the Mass.

When you're done with this course, you'll have a much different perspective - and hopefully a far greater love and appreciation for the deep mystery of faith we enter into in each Mass.

Let's jump right in and look at the Mass through a new, "biblical" lens.

Every Mass begins the same way. We make the Sign of the Cross and say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

We'll get to why we do that later.

For now, just note that the Sign of the Cross started with the Apostles, who "sealed" the newly baptized by tracing this sign on their foreheads (see [Ephesians 1:13](#); [Revelation 7:3](#)).

The words we pray as we make this sign come straight from the lips of Jesus. Indeed, they're among the last words He spoke to His Apostles (see [Matthew 28:19](#)).

Next in the Mass, the priest greets us. Again he speaks, and we respond, with words from the Bible. We say: "The Lord be with you" (see [2 Timothy 4:22](#)).

In Scripture these words are a pledge of divine presence, protection and help (see [Exodus 3:12](#); [Luke 1:28](#)). The priest might opt to use a different greeting, such as "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." but that greeting too will be drawn from Scripture (see [2 Corinthians 13:14](#); [Ephesians 1:2](#)).

The Mass continues this way - as a "dialogue" between the faithful and God, mediated by the priest. What's striking - and it's something we rarely recognize - is that we carry on this conversation almost entirely in the language of the Bible.

When we beg "Lord, have mercy" - our cry for help and forgiveness is one that runs throughout Scripture (see [Psalm 51:1](#); [Baruch 3:2](#); [Luke 18:13,38,39](#)).

When we glorify God, we use the song the angels sang that first Christmas night (see [Luke 2:14](#)).

Even the Creed and the Eucharistic prayers are composed of biblical words and phrases.

As we prepare to kneel before the altar, we sing another angelic hymn from the Bible - "Holy, holy, holy . . ." (see [Isaiah 6:3](#); [Revelation 4:8](#)). We join that to the triumphant Psalm sung by those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes . . ." (see [Mark 11:9-10](#)).

At the heart of the Mass, we hear Jesus' words from the Last Supper (see [Mark 14:22-24](#)).

Then we pray to our Father in the words our Savior gave us (see [Matthew 6:9-13](#)). We acknowledge Him with a line from John the Baptist: "Behold, the Lamb of God . . ." (see [John 1:29,36](#)).

And before receiving Him in communion, we confess our unworthiness - in words once used by a Roman soldier seeking Jesus' help (see [Luke 7:6-7](#)).

What we say and hear in the Mass comes to us from the Bible. And what we "do" in the Mass, we do because it was done in the Bible.

We kneel (see [Psalm 95:6](#); [Acts 21:5](#)) and sing hymns (see [2 Maccabees 10:7,38](#); [Acts 16:25](#)); we offer each other a sign of peace (see [1 Samuel 25:6](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:26](#)).

We gather around an altar (see [Genesis 12:7](#); [Exodus 24:4](#); [2 Samuel 24:25](#); [Revelation 16:7](#)), with incense (see [Jeremiah 41:5](#); [Revelation 8:4](#)), served by priests (see [Exodus 28:3-4](#); [Revelation 20:6](#)). We offer thanks with bread and wine (see [Genesis 14:18](#); [Matthew 26:26-28](#)).

From the first Sign of the Cross to the last "Amen" (see [Nehemiah 8:6](#); [2 Corinthians 1:20](#)), the Mass is an aural and sensual tapestry woven with words and actions, even accessories drawn from the Bible.

We address God in words that He himself has given us through the inspired writers of sacred Scripture. And He in turn comes to us - instructing, exhorting and sanctifying us - again through the living Word of the inspired Scriptures.

## **B. Words of Spirit and Life**

None of this is accidental.

In God's plan of salvation, the Bible and the Mass are given for our salvation - to enable us to penetrate the mystery of God's plan, and to unite our lives to His.

Scripture, Paul said, is "inspired by God" and given to us "for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (see [2 Timothy 3:15-16](#); [John 20:31](#)).

The salvation and new life that Scripture proclaims, is "actualized" - made real in our lives - in the Mass.

As Jesus said: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (see [John 6:53-54](#)).

That's why the worship of the Mass is biblical worship. The Bible gives the Mass its "efficacy" - its power to deliver what it promises, its power to bring us into communion with the true and living presence of Jesus.

Our worship can be life-transforming because the biblical Word we hear is "not a human word but . . . truly is the Word of God" (see [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#)).

Ordinary human language, no matter how beautiful or persuasive, could never communicate God's grace. It can't make us holy or bring us to "share in the divine nature" (see [2 Peter 1:4](#)).

Only the sacred speech of God can perform the divine action of transforming bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Lord. Only the sacred speech of God can bring us into communion with the living God.

In God's plan of salvation, the Bible leads us to the Liturgy. In the Liturgy, the written text of sacred Scripture becomes the living Word.

The Bible's meaning and purpose is fulfilled in the Mass - the words of Scripture become "spirit and life . . . the words of eternal life" (see [John 6:63,68](#)).

## **II. Finding the Mass in the Bible**

### **A. Tradition Received from the Lord**

The Mass is also biblical worship in a more obvious sense.

This is the worship Jesus commanded at His Last Supper.

When he wrote to the Corinthians - to correct abuses in the way they were celebrating the Eucharist - Paul reminded them of the night the Lord was handed over (see [1 Corinthians 11:23-29](#)).

Paul described Jesus taking bread, giving thanks, breaking it, and saying, "This is My body" and in the same way taking wine and saying "this cup is the new covenant in My blood." He recalled Jesus telling the Apostles: "Do this in remembrance of Me."

Though Paul was not there at the Last Supper, he tells them he received this teaching from the churches founded by the Apostles; they, in turn, received this teaching directly from the Lord: "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you"

The Greek words Paul uses - translated as "received" and "handed on" - are technical terms the rabbis of his day used to describe the keeping and teaching of sacred traditions.

Paul uses these same words when he talks about his teaching on Christ's death and Resurrection (see [1 Corinthians 15:2-3](#)).

These two sacred traditions - the truth about Christ's death and Resurrection and the truth about the Eucharist, the memorial of His death - were received from the Lord and and handed on by the Apostles.

These traditions were inseparable and crucial to the message of salvation they preached.

Through Christ's death and Resurrection, Paul said, "we are being saved." In the Eucharist, that saving event is "remembered" in a way that communicates that salvation to us: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup," Paul said, "you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes" (see [1 Corinthians 11:26](#)).

## **B. In the Upper Room**

The tradition Paul describes is very similar to the tradition handed on in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (see [Matthew 26:26-29](#); [Mark 14:22-25](#); [Luke 22:15-20](#)).

Each recalls the Eucharist's beginnings in close, though not identical, details.

Each agrees it was during Passover - the feast God instituted on the eve of Israel's flight from Egypt (see [Exodus 12:1-28](#)).

They agree, too, that it was the night before He died, during His final meal with His Apostles.

During the meal, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying, "This is My body." He also took a cup of wine; after giving thanks to God, He gave it to His disciples saying, "This is My blood . . . of the [new] covenant."

Matthew and Mark say Jesus spoke of the "blood of the covenant." Moses used those words when he ratified Israel's covenant with God, sprinkling the people with animal blood (see [Exodus 24:4-8](#)).

Luke, like Paul, says Jesus spoke of "the new covenant" (see [Luke 22:20](#); [1 Corinthians 11:25](#)).

This probably refers to Jeremiah's prophecy that God would make a "new covenant" with Israel. Unlike the covenant He made when He led them out of Egypt, by this new covenant He would "write" His law upon their hearts, not in tablets of stone (see [Jeremiah 31:31-33](#); [2 Corinthians 3:3](#)).

Jesus, in all three of these Gospel accounts, stresses a sacrificial meaning for His death. He says His blood is "poured out for many." In Matthew, He offers himself "for the forgiveness of sins."

All three add a note of urgent expectation - Jesus vows that He won't drink "from the fruit of the vine" until "the Kingdom of God" comes.

### **C. Bread of Life, True Vine**

John's Gospel doesn't record the scene from the upper room.

This isn't surprising. In general, John is more concerned to explain the deep biblical background of Jesus' words and deeds and to fill-in apparent gaps in the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Though he doesn't narrate Jesus saying, "This is My Body" and "This is My Blood," John gives us two sermons in which Jesus says something very similar.

In the one, delivered in a synagogue at Capernaum during Passover, He says two times: "I am the Bread of Life" (see [John 6:34, 51](#)). In the other, delivered at the Last Supper (see [John 13:2,4](#)), Jesus again says two times: "I am the Vine" (see [John 15:1,5](#)).

In both scenes, Jesus makes a direct statement about His identity ("I am"). He also uses the same expression in both to describe the life-giving communion He has come to bring.

Those who eat Him as the Bread of Life "remain in Me," he says. Those who are joined to Him through the Eucharistic wine, the fruit of the true Vine, also "remain in Me," He says (compare [John 6:56](#); [John 15:4-7](#)).

#### **D. The Eucharist According to the Scriptures**

In coming lessons, we'll return to these narratives of the Eucharist's origins, along with numerous other New and Old Testament passages with Eucharistic overtones.

But from the texts we've just looked at, we can already sketch the outlines of the biblical teaching on the Eucharist we will explore:

The Eucharist is "covenantal." As presented in the Gospels, the Eucharist is the climax of the salvation history unfolded in the covenants of the Old Testament. It has a special relationship to Israel's Passover and Exodus.

The Eucharist is sacrificial and atones for sin. That's the literal meaning of the words attributed to Jesus at the Last Supper.

The Eucharist is a memorial that creates the Church, the body of those who believe. The command to "do this" calls the Church into being. Through its remembrance, the Church offers God's new and everlasting covenant to all generations.

The Eucharist is communion in the Body and Blood of Jesus that brings eternal life. As Paul says of the Eucharist: "Is it not a participation (literally "communion") in the Blood of Christ . . . in the Body of Christ?" (see [1 Corinthians 10:16](#)). The Eucharist is eating and drinking in the Kingdom of God until the Lord comes. The Eucharist remembers a past salvific event, relives that event in the present, and stirs hope for a future salvific happening - the final coming of the Lord.

### III. From the Bible to the Mass

#### A. Hearing the Apostles, Breaking the Bread

The first descriptions we have of the Church in the New Testament are decidedly "eucharistic."

Luke says, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles and to . . . the breaking of the bread" (see [Acts 2:42](#)).

The "teachings of the Apostles" are sermons like those recorded in Acts and writings inspired by the Holy Spirit (see [2 Peter 3:15-16](#); [1 Corinthians 2:13](#)). The "breaking of the bread" is Luke's word for the Eucharist (see [Luke 24:35](#); [Acts 20:7,11](#)).

Here then, in this most ancient description of the Church's life, we see Word and Sacrament, Bible and Liturgy, united.

And the New Testament was composed and developed in the context of the early Church's worship.

The epistles were first written to be read publicly "before" those gathered for the Eucharist (see [1 Thessalonians 5:26](#); [Colossians 4:16](#); [1 Timothy 4:13](#)).

Greetings and blessings in these letters were often adapted from prayers and hymns used in the Liturgy (see [1 Peter 1:2-5](#); [1 Corinthians 16:22](#); [Colossians 1:15-20](#); [Philippians 2:6-12](#); [1 Timothy 4:16](#); [2 Timothy 2:11-13](#)).

The Book of Revelation was written to be "read aloud" during worship (see [Revelation 1:3](#)). And the shape of the Gospels - which consist of many short episodes from Jesus' life and teaching - probably indicates that these scenes were first written down to be read in the Mass.

## **B. Hearing is Believing**

"Faith comes from what is heard," Paul said (see [Romans 10:17](#)). And the early Church heard God's Word in the Mass.

Early Eucharistic celebrations followed the same "two-part" structure as our Mass today - readings from "the teachings of the Apostles" followed by the "breaking of the bread."

We see this in a story of Paul celebrating the Eucharist in Troas. His sermon lasted until midnight, causing one of his parishioners to fall asleep and plunge to his death. Undeterred, Paul revived the man and continued the service. He "broke the bread" (see Acts 20:7-12).

In addition to the Apostles' teachings, the earliest liturgies probably included readings from the Old Testament.

That's the testimony of perhaps our oldest account of the Eucharist outside the Bible. Describing this part of the Mass in 155 A.D., St. Justin Martyr said "the memoirs of the Apostles and the writings of the prophets are read" followed by a homily (see Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1345.)

Use of the Old Testament in the Liturgy - as well as the "two-part" structure of the Mass - can be traced to the example of Jesus.

In fact, the Bible and the Mass were inseparably united for all time by Jesus himself on the first Easter night.

Luke tells us that upon rising from the dead, Jesus encountered two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see [Luke 24:13-35](#)).

They didn't recognize Him at first. Nonetheless, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets," Jesus explained the meaning of the Old Testament to them - showing how all the promises God made there were fulfilled in Him (see also [Luke 24:44-48](#)). As He spoke their hearts were "burning within."

Then Jesus sat down at table, took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them.

Notice Luke's deliberate use of the same words used in his Last Supper narrative: At table, Jesus takes . . . blesses . . . breaks . . . and gives the bread (compare [Luke 22:14-20](#)).

Luke is giving us a picture of the Eucharist, the first to be celebrated after the Resurrection.

Jesus first "proclaims" the Scriptures, showing how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament made in His blood. Then He gives thanks for this covenant in the breaking of the bread.

When He does this, the promise of the Scriptures, Old Testament and New, is fulfilled - the disciples' eyes are opened and they come to "know" Jesus in intimate communion.

Since that night, believers have gathered every Sunday, the day of the Resurrection known as the Lord's day (see [Revelation 1:10](#); [Acts 20:7](#)). In this gathering we open the Scriptures, and break the bread.

And when we do that in the Mass, we relive the experience of the disciples at Emmaus. The Scriptures are fulfilled - the Word of His new covenant "burns within" as if being written in our hearts; and our eyes are opened in faith to know Him in the breaking of the bread.

### C. Back to Mass

That's why we begin the Mass the way we do.

Jesus commissioned His Apostles to preach His Word and to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (see [Matthew 28:19](#)).

As newborn sons and daughters of the Father, the baptized gain access to the family table of the Lord's supper. There they "tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the Holy Spirit and tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come" (see [Hebrews 6:4](#)).

This is the biblical legacy we recall - and become a part of - at the start of every Mass. As we make the Sign of the Cross and repeat the words of the Lord's final commission, we remember and renew our covenant with God, made when we were baptized.

The Apostles began the tradition of marking the newly baptized with the Sign of the Cross.

It was a seal of the Lord's salvation (see [2 Corinthians 1:22](#); [Ephesians 1:13](#)) and a mark of protection by which "the Lord knows who are His" (see [2 Timothy 2:19](#)).

The Bible's last book reveals that those marked with "the seal of God on their foreheads" are spared from destruction (see [Revelation 7:3](#); [9:4](#); [14:1](#); [22:4](#)) and are called to participate in a heavenly liturgy - "the wedding feast" or "marriage supper of the Lamb" (see Revelation 19:7,9; 21:9).

As we'll see in this course, that's where we truly are in the Mass. We have been saved from sin and death and are happy to have been called to the Lamb's Supper.

He is truly with us as we gather in His name (see [Matthew 18:20](#)). The words of the biblical promise - "The Lord be with you" - are fulfilled in our hearing (see [Luke 4:21](#)).

The Bible leaves off with the Lord's promise that He is coming soon (see [Revelation 22:20](#)). And where the Bible leaves off, the Mass begins.

#### IV. Study Questions

1. What we say and hear in the Mass comes to us from the Bible. Give some examples.
2. What we "do" in the Mass, we do because it was done in the Bible. Give some examples.
3. Why is the Bible alone able to give the Mass its life-transforming power?
4. Name some of the details about the Last Supper that are similar in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul.
5. What evidence do we have that the "two-part" structure of the Mass and the use of the Old Testament in the Liturgy comes from Jesus?

#### For prayer and reflection:

Does your heart "burn within you" as you hear the Scriptures proclaimed in Mass?

Try preparing for Sunday Mass by reading and praying over the Scriptures to be proclaimed that day. As you read, try to understand how the promises of the Old Testament reading are fulfilled in the Gospel reading.

Do you reflect on the biblical basis of the Mass?

Try reading and praying over the biblical passages associated with the Introductory Rite of the Mass (for example [Matthew 18:20](#); [28:19-20](#); [2 Corinthians 1:22](#); [13:14](#); [Ephesians 1:2;1:13](#); [2 Timothy 2:19](#); [4:22](#); [Exodus 3:12](#); [Luke 1:28](#); [Luke 18:13,38,39](#); [Psalm 51:1](#); [Baruch 3:2](#)). See if this deepens your appreciation and your worship.

