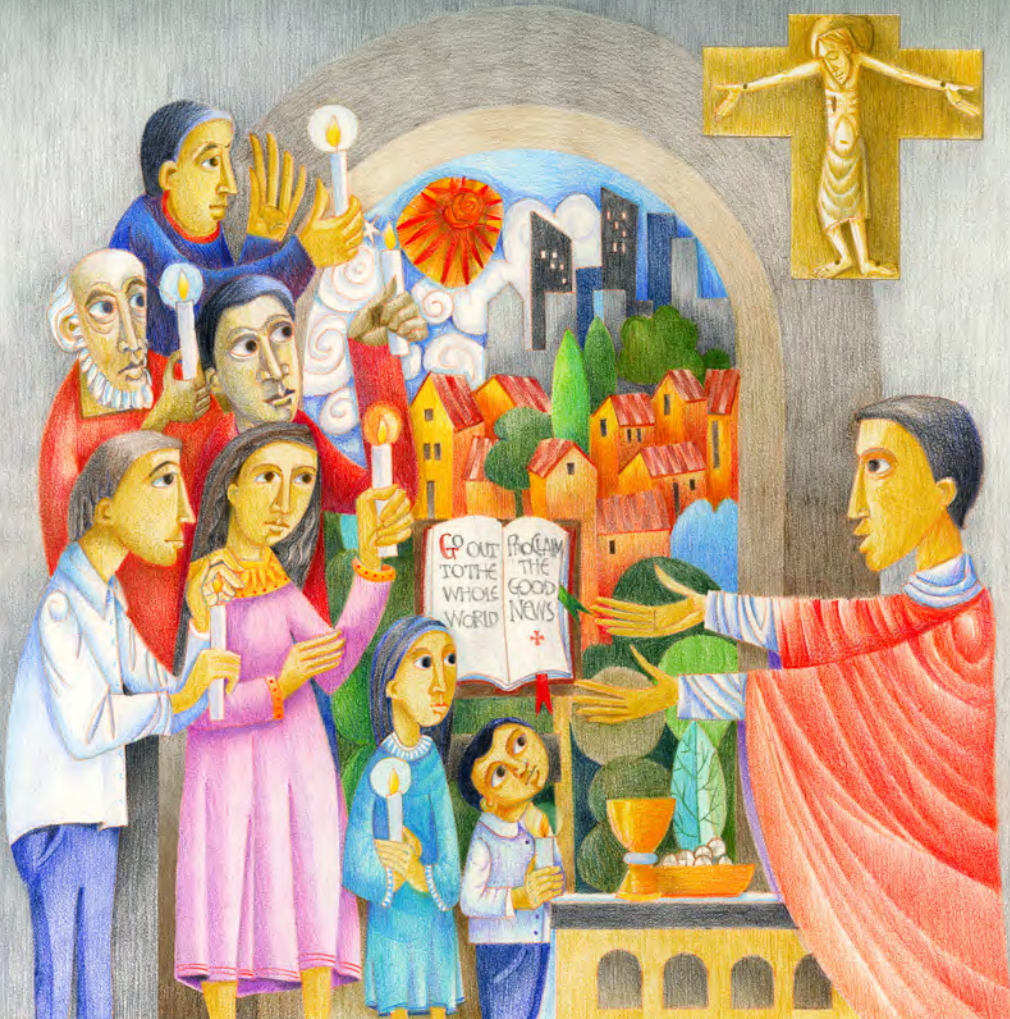


FROM MASS TO MISSION

Understanding the Mass and Its
Significance for Our Christian Life



TRISH SULLIVAN VANNI

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This book was written by Trish Sullivan Vanni with Paul Turner.

In fond memory of Rev. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, who taught that our gracious God lives for giving, especially in the Eucharist.—PSV and DAN

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The title of this book was inspired by *Dies Domini*, 45. The cover of this book presents a metaphorical illustration of our charge to go forth from Mass as disciples called by Christ to be his light in the world (see Matthew 28:16–20).

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WHY GO TO MASS?



“By our partaking of this mystery, almighty Father,
give us life through your Spirit,
grant that we may be conformed to the image of your Son,
and confirm us in the bond of communion.”

—Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs III

On the night before he died, Jesus reclined at table with his disciples. In a matter of hours, he would freely give up his life—a great act of love for them and for all. While they ate, he took bread, and proclaimed it to be his Body. He lifted a cup of wine, and declared it his Blood. He promised his disciples that every time they blessed and shared wine in this way, he would be present. By doing this, he knew that his sacrifice would touch not only those who knew him in earthly life, but every believer who would come to know and follow him in faith.

Ever since, in small groups or large, in spaces that are soaring and grand or modest and humble, his followers have gathered on the Lord’s Day, Sunday, to share this holy meal together. We call this the celebration of the Mass. Every week, all over the globe, millions of faithful people gather to hear the Word of God, to pray the prayers, and to share God’s holy meal. We gather together as one body. We come together in small rural chapels in Slovakia and Nigeria; in parishes in Ireland, the United States, and Mexico; in basilicas and cathedrals in every diocese in cities around the globe. We leave home. We gather with friends and strangers. We enact a predictable ritual, and we change in unpredictable ways. We place all the events of the past week inside that Mass to offer them for the



We gather in memory of Jesus Christ.

glory of God. We prepare for the duties of the coming week and seek their sanctification. We discard from our lives what keeps us from Christ, and we retain what makes us good disciples.

For Catholic Christians, gathering as an assembly of believers, hearing the Word of God proclaimed, praying the prayers and partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ is the central act and expression of our faith. We believe that the liturgy—through symbols, signs, gestures, and words—speaks to us about ourselves, our world, and our God. United as one in the Eucharist, with the priest celebrant at their head, the members of the



As people who know Christ, we can serve him in the world with joy and conviction.

Church form the mystical Body of Christ. And all of us are linked to each other in a powerful way, and in particular to anyone who is suffering, poor, or persecuted.

When we understand and embrace the meaning of the Mass, we can enter into the experience with hearts and minds that are more open to the mystery that it holds. We can begin to make connections between what we do at Mass

and our commitment to justice and service in the world. We can become people who not only know Christ, but who also participate in the life and mission of the global Catholic community, inviting others to know him, love him, and serve him with joy and conviction.

The Many Names for the Mass

We give the Mass many names. The word *Mass* itself comes from the Latin word *missa*, which means “mission.” At the end of Mass, the priest or deacon dismisses us to go out into the world with a very important task: “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” What we pray at Mass is an English translation of some Latin texts. If we attended a Mass in Latin, the priest would dismiss us with the phrase, “*Ite, missa est.*” Literally translated, this means, “Go, she [the Church] has been sent.” And so, what we call this entire celebration—Mass—actually means “mission.” What we do at Mass is so important that it affects how we live in the world.

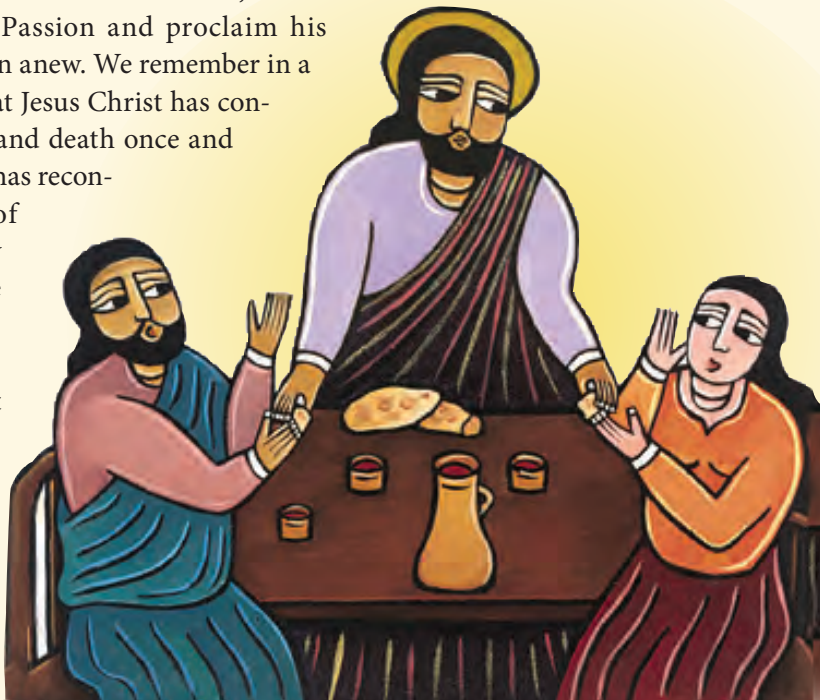
The Mass is often referred to as the liturgy. The word *liturgy* is from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which means “the work of the people.” The Mass is not the work of one person—the priest—but the entire community that is worshipping God.

We call the Mass the *Lord’s Supper*. Before embracing his Passion and Death, Jesus gathered his disciples and instituted this holy meal. He took the bread and said the blessing, broke the bread, and shared it; he took a cup of wine, blessed it, and shared it. His promise was that whenever this was done in remembrance of him, he would be there, and his followers would become one Body in him.

We speak of the Mass as both a *sacrifice* and a *memorial*. Jesus Christ made the perfect sacrifice in his Death on the Cross, and this one sacrifice is made eternally present in the Eucharist. The same Jesus Christ who gave himself freely on the Cross at Calvary, establishing the new, eternal covenant, now offers himself and becomes present to us. The Eucharist is a memorial because in the Mass, we recount the Lord’s Passion and proclaim his Resurrection anew. We remember in a real way that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death once and for all, and has reconciled all of humanity to God. We become a sign and an instrument of God’s love and promise.

“The more lively the eucharistic faith of the People of God, the deeper is its sharing in ecclesial life in steadfast commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his disciples.”

—Pope Benedict XVI,
Sacramentum caritatis, 6



We call the Mass *Eucharist*, which means “thanksgiving,” or “to give thanks.” The word *Eucharist* is often used to refer to the sacrament itself but



it also refers to the entire celebration of the Mass. *Eucharist* is an action. To participate at Mass, in the Eucharist, is to be part of a momentous, living act of gratitude. As Catholics, we don’t just thank God individually and in the silence of our hearts; instead, we come together physically to recall what God has done for us, thank God, and receive with gratitude the bread and wine that has

been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. We express gratitude for the abundance of our lives, the magnificence of creation, and our redemption in Jesus Christ.

The Paschal Mystery

We celebrate the Eucharist because on the night before he died, just before accepting his Cross and anticipating the mystery of the Resurrection, Jesus asked us to do this. We are his disciples. We obey his will. We do this in memory of him. The Mass is a commemoration of the Lord’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection—his Paschal Mystery. *Paschal* is an English word that derives from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, or *Passover*. The saving Death of Jesus is associated with the Jewish festival of Passover, because the Last Supper was most likely a Passover meal. At Passover, then and now, the Jewish people recount how God helped Moses obtain their freedom from captivity in ancient Egypt.

“This is my body that is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.”

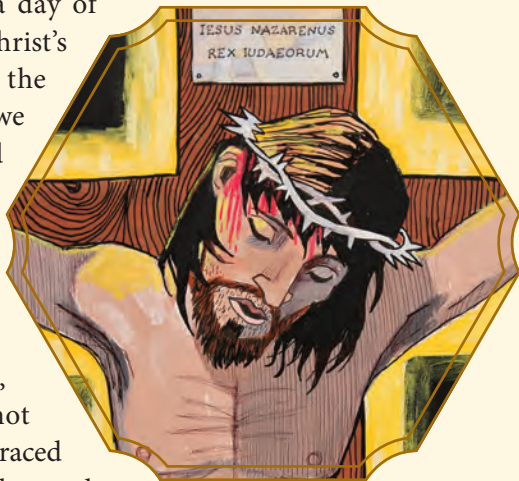
—1 Corinthians 11:24

On the first night of Passover, the Torah (the primary Jewish Scriptures or teachings) instructs Jewish people to ritually slaughter a lamb, commemorating the first night before the Exodus. On that night, the enslaved

Israelites marked their doorposts with the blood of a lamb, a sign to the angel of death to pass by their homes and spare their firstborn sons.

But unlike the Passover account in Exodus, the Paschal Mystery of Christ affirms God's saving plan for all people, not just the Jewish people. In the Christian tradition, Christ is called "the Lamb of God," because he has become the perfect—and final—sacrifice. The first letter of Peter notes, "You were ransomed from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb" (1 Peter 1:18–19).

By setting aside Sunday as a day of worship, we profess our faith in Christ's Resurrection. When we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. We observe the Lord's Day differently from other days. Even the rest we take on Sundays foreshadows the eternal rest to which Christ invites us. With one heart and voice, we celebrate that Jesus Christ not only freed us from sin, but also embraced us in his Resurrection and achieved our sal-



vation. When we participate in Mass, we join ourselves, body, mind, and spirit, to our Redeemer, who pours himself out for us. We are remembering that Jesus Christ came into human experience and brought with him grace, reconciliation, and life everlasting. He did this through his Paschal Mystery.

The Real Presence of Christ at Mass

When we gather to celebrate the Mass, the Risen Christ is present to us in many ways, most especially, in the bread and the wine which have been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Although some other Christians believe that the bread and wine simply represent Christ, we believe that the consecrated elements actually are the glorified Body and Blood of Christ, as he promised at the Last Supper.

Christ is also present in the Word of God when the Sacred Scriptures are proclaimed by the reader(s), the cantor who leads the community in praying the psalm in song, and when the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel. He is present in the person of the priest, who offers the sacrifice of

the Mass. The priest is acting in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) as he leads the community in prayer and consecrates the bread and wine (the elements of the Eucharist). And Christ is present in the faithful who are gathered as an assembly to pray and to sing, because Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Participation at Mass

The Mass is more than a personal encounter with Christ, as riveting as that is. Much more than an occasion for personal adoration, the Mass gathers the faithful as the Body of Christ—the people gathered in our setting, the millions of other people around the world, and all the faithful people who have died but who are alive in Christ in heaven.

At church, we meet others who share our values. We give and receive support. We keep in touch with friends. We connect with strangers. We meet Christ individually, but we also meet his Body, the Church.

Together, the faithful raise one common voice in prayer. The people express their unity by assuming common postures and exchanging mutual



At Mass, we offer ourselves in sacrifice to God, and we share divine life in the Eucharist.



The Risen Christ is present to us most especially in the Eucharist, in the Word proclaimed, in the minister, and in the gathered assembly.

gestures. Even though we all experience some disagreements within the community, our faith in Christ firmly holds us as one.

Mass reaches its climax when the gathered participants share the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion. The unity of the faithful with one another and with Christ is revealed and enriched.

This communion follows sacrifice. We offer to God the efforts we have made to spread the Gospel throughout the previous week. We contribute to the support of the parish. Sometimes effort is required of us. We have to make time and prioritize going to church. We are challenged and accept petty annoyances that distract us while we are there. We offer ourselves in sacrifice to God, and we share divine life in the Eucharist.

At its heart, the Mass makes present the reality of how completely loved we are. God loves us with an unlimited, infinite, perfect, almost humanly incomprehensible love. In fact, “God is love” (1 John 4:16), a love that comes to us as pure gift; a gift that never stops giving. He sent us Jesus his Son, and with and through him the Holy Spirit, so that we would be empowered to do the one thing he asks in return: that we love God, one another, and all of creation.

Liturgical prayer shapes what we believe and how we should act.

“God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.”
—1 John 4:16b

The Mass is repetitious. Many words and gestures do not change. Yet repetition helps Catholics enter the Paschal Mystery more deeply. Freed from the challenge to create new prayer every week, the entire community can focus

on the matter at hand. Outside of the liturgy, many individuals follow a daily routine that includes meals, work, study, rest, and play. These habits help us accomplish tasks and feel at peace. The same applies to liturgical prayer. The difference is that liturgical prayer shapes what we believe and how we should act.

When we come together at Mass, we are not merely imitating, replicating, or reproducing an event that happened in Jerusalem long ago. The Mass is not mere recollection. We believe that every time we pray the Mass, God makes present the very thing we are remembering, here and now, right in this very moment. We bring our fears and our hopes, our personal and



God listens to the deepest longings of our hearts and heals our wounds.

global concerns, and we place them before the Lord, trusting that he hears our prayers and is concerned about our every need. God is waiting to hold us in our struggles with work; our conflicts with our family members; our challenges in our friendships or with our spouses or those we are dating. God is

Participating at Sunday Mass is the most important act that Catholics do.

listening for the deepest longings of our hearts, ready to heal our hurt, anger, and fear.

Participating at Mass is the means by which we express the fullness of our relationship with God and receive his grace. The Church teaches that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen gentium*, 11) because it is food for the journey. It’s the meal that satisfies our hunger for truth and freedom, and the fuel we need to live as disciples. Just like a mighty river flows from a source, our faith and our actions are

empowered through our encounter with Christ, “the living bread which has come down from heaven” (John 6:51). Just like hikers who come to the crest of a great mountain and are bowled over by the breathtaking view that they see from the mountaintop, the Eucharist is the moment when we experience not only everything that God has done for us in the past, but all that he is doing for us right here and now.

Participation in the World

There is really nothing else that we can do—no prayer or action that is more significant or more important—than participating at Sunday Mass. It is the centerpiece of Catholic spirituality. Of course, Catholics perform other admirable activities. They teach, they feed the hungry, they visit the sick, they pray. Nonetheless, participating at Sunday Mass is the center of all these activities. Participating at Mass brings the previous week to a conclusion. It sets the following

“Every disciple of the Lord Jesus shares in this mission. To do their part, adult Catholics must be mature in faith and well equipped to share the Gospel, promoting it in every family circle, in every church gathering, in every place of work, and in every public forum. They must be women and men of prayer whose faith is alive and vital, grounded in a deep commitment to the person and message of Jesus.”

—*Our Hearts
Were Burning within Us*, 2

“In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular the *truth about the love* that is the very essence of God.”

—Pope Benedict XVI
Sacramentum caritatis, 2

week on the right path. Through it we offer all the sacrifice of our work and our love. The Mass invites us to communion with one another and with Christ. It sends us into the world to bring Christ to others and to be Christ for others. When we receive Christ in the Eucharist at

Mass, when we hear his Word, we are able to bring him more fully into our everyday lives, to love and serve others as he did when he walked among us.

Our lives as Christians begin at Baptism. The Christian life is, and should be, filled with challenge and change. Just as we do in our everyday lives, we need to grow and mature, becoming conformed to the image and likeness of God. Our journey of faith will be complete when we take our last breath—hopefully when we have lived a full life and are ready to return home to God.

**The Mass
is a powerful
source
of growth.**

The Mass is a powerful source of our growth as Christians. Each week we come together and directly experience the presence of Christ. In doing so, we are slowly changed—transformed—understanding him more deeply and becoming more like him. Our Catholic faith is an experience of the



To be Christian is to take our belief in Jesus and live it in the company of others.

unconditional love of God. Made in God's image and likeness, we believe that God cherishes us and wants us to flourish. Our primary expression of this, a sort of great communication between God and us, is accomplished at Mass. There, we enter into "communion" with God, each other, and the world.

Our Christian faith is not solitary. When Jesus sent his disciples out before him, he sent them two by two. During a homily in May, 2015, Pope Francis observed, "Our Christian identity is belonging to a people: the Church. Without this, we are not Christians." To be a Christian is to take our belief in Jesus and then take steps to live it out in the company of others—to demonstrate to a world in need who he was through our own actions, and to join ourselves to all the followers of Jesus Christ who have gone before us. As the Body of Christ, we are called not only to love one another but to serve one another with generosity and selflessness. Being the recipients of the love that God has poured out so completely, we are able to imitate God's generosity in our own lives and in the world.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

—Matthew 25:35–36

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- ❖ Why do you go to Mass? Why is it important to you?
- ❖ When you leave Mass, do you feel changed? How?
- ❖ Does the Mass lead you to serve others? Why or why not?
- ❖ How do you serve Christ in your daily life? How is this connected to the Mass?