

The New Roman Missal

Reviewing the entrance rites

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By Sr. Ann Rehrauer

There are three transitional rites in the liturgy: Introductory rites at the beginning, the preparation of the altar and gifts, and the concluding rites.

Liturgy begins “when the people are gathered.” This gathering is not simply a functional arrival at a designated time and place. We come together each week because we have been called by God. We come to give thanks and praise, to pray about the past week and to receive what we need to live the week ahead.

When a group assembles for a meeting or social event, there are certain ways to begin. Often there is a call to order and welcome. There may be an introduction of the program and speakers, and in religious groups, there is often an opening prayer. These elements enable people to transition from the busyness of life to enter into the event. The same is true for the liturgy. We walk through the church doors and the introductory rites help us move from daily activity to a sacred time and place.

The purpose of these rites is explained in #47 of the General Instruction (GIRM): to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers.

We begin with an entrance procession accompanied by the entrance chant or song. The ministers process from the back of the church to the sanctuary or from sacristy to sanctuary. Originally Mass was celebrated in people’s homes so there was no need for a procession. When the community grew and moved to basilicas for worship, the celebrant entered and moved through the assembly. By the sixth century, the assembly was singing psalms before Mass.

Today, as the ministers reach the sanctuary, the deacon or reader may place the Book of the Gospels on the altar, symbolizing the unity of the two “tables” of word and Eucharist.

Since the fourth century the altar has received special reverence as a symbol of Christ. When the ministers approach the altar, they bow to it, the priest kisses it, and he may incense it.

He then goes to the chair and begins with the sign of the cross. This Trinitarian aspect of our prayer has been used since at least the third century. Tertullian (c. 200) writes, “We mark our forehead with the sign of the cross. At every step and forward motion, at every

arrival and departure, when dressing and putting on shoes, bathing, eating, lighting lamps, going to bed, sitting still — whatever common thing occupies us, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross.”

After the sign of the cross, the priest greets the people. By the greeting and our response, the mystery of the church gathered together is signified (GIRM 50). There are three options for the greeting — all of which come from St. Paul’s letters.

The penitential act follows, or during Easter, the blessing and sprinkling of water. All the options include an invitation by the priest, a general confession by the community, and a prayer for mercy by the priest. This last prayer is called an absolution, but it is really a request for God’s mercy, rather than the absolution received in the Sacrament of Penance, which is a declaration, “I absolve you.”

On Sundays and major feasts we sing the Gloria, which has its origins in the Eastern churches of the fourth century. It is a hymn of praise to Christ sung by the people or people and choir — not by the choir alone. It became part of the liturgy in sixth century France when the bishop celebrated Christmas Mass. Later it was extended to Sunday Mass, and then to Masses celebrated by priests.

The final element is the collect or opening prayer. After the invitation to pray, the priest pauses and then “collects” our prayers. Each collect has four parts: the address to God, a relative clause that describes a characteristic of God or some act of God in history, then a petition and the conclusion in the name of the Trinity. Usually this prayer is addressed to God the Father. At this point we should be focused and prepared to listen to God’s word.

Sr. Rehrauer is the diocesan director of Evangelization, Living Justice, and Worship.

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