

Understanding the Mass

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This is the fifth of a series of monthly faith formation articles. The objective of this series of articles is to provide our parishioners with further insights into the tenets of our faith and our Church traditions. In this article we will explore the Symbolic Objects used for the Liturgy. We encourage you to take the time to reflect on this article as well as reflect on any questions you might have about your faith, traditions, or topics that we can address in future articles. Even if you feel you understand the monthly topic, please take the time to be open to the Holy Spirit's intervention to help you deepen your understanding.



Cross & Crucifix

The most recognized symbol of Christianity is the Cross or Crucifix. The difference between the two is that the crucifix is a cross with the image of the dead body of Jesus, or corpus, nailed to the cross. Some crucifixes show the risen Christ. The use of crosses and crucifixes as symbols became common place in the 4th Century. Prior to this time, Christians used a Christ monogram or fish as symbols.



Easter, or Paschal Candle

Every year at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, a new candle known as the Easter Candle or Paschal Candle is lit from the Easter fire and then blessed. The priest when blessing the candle says two prayers. The first prayer acknowledges that Christ is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega and praises Him. As he says the first prayer the priest "carves" (usually tracing the already carved figures) into the candle a cross, then the Greek letters for alpha and omega followed by the current year. He then begins the second prayer: "By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us. Amen." He then inserts 5 five grains of incense into the candle that are usually encased on wax-covered nails. After the prayers, the priest holds the candle aloft and proclaims, "The Light of Christ." Everyone in attendance responds, "Thanks be to God" and lights their small candle from the Paschal Candle. The community lighting shows that all the baptized share in the light of Christ and are to be light to the world. The Paschal Candle is placed beside the ambo where it remains for the Easter Season. Outside the Easter Season, the candle resides close to the baptismal font. Baptismal candles are lit from the Paschal Candle to signify that the newly baptized share in the resurrection of Christ. At funerals, the Paschal Candle is placed next to the coffin or the urn to symbolize Christ's resurrection and our participation in it through our baptism.



Liturgical Books: Gospel Book, Lectionary and Sacramentary

The Gospel Book is the most important of all books used during the liturgy. This is because it contains the story of our faith as told by the evangelists: Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Gospel Book is the main symbol of Christ's presence because Christ, the Word of God, is contained in it, as told through the apostles. The significance of the Gospel Book is shown when it is carried into the Church and held aloft in the entrance procession of the liturgy. Since it is a symbol of Christ's presence it must be always treated with reverence. The Mass has two key components: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Gospel is proclaimed from the ambo, which is a permanent structure made of the same materials and constructed with the same height as the altar, symbolizing its importance in the overall liturgy of the Mass. The Lectionary is also used during mass and contains the readings for every day of the liturgical year. It is used to proclaim the first and second readings and often for the psalm. The Sacramentary, also known as the Missal or Roman Missal, is the third book used for the celebration of the Eucharist. This book contains all the prayers for the Mass and is used exclusively by the celebrant to lead the assembly in prayer. It is not a symbol of Christ and so is never carried in procession.



Holy Oils

Three kinds of oil are used in the sacramental life of the Church: the oil of catechumens; the oil for the anointing of the sick, and the sacred chrism. **The oil of catechumens** is used for two of the sacraments of initiation: baptism and confirmation. This oil strengthens those who receive it for their spiritual journey. **The oil for the anointing of the sick** strengthens those who receive it to endure their suffering and, God willing, heal them in body and spirit. It is administered to those who suffer from a grave illness, about to undergo major surgery, the elderly and those close to death. It is a sacrament that can be received more than once. **The Sacred Chrism** is used during the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the ordination of bishops and priests. The oil symbolizes the imparting of the Holy Spirit associated with each sacrament. Unlike the other oils, Sacred chrism is scented with perfume so the experience of being anointed is also an experience of smell. The oils are kept in a container called an ambry typically located in the sanctuary.



Chalice and Paten

Two of the most recognized liturgical objects. Prior to the 4th Century chalices were typically made of glass or pottery. During the 4th century chalices were made of precious metals and richly decorated. They are usually accompanied by a similarly decorated paten. The chalice holds the wine while the paten holds the bread (host (s)) prior to consecration. After consecration, the chalice contains the Blood of Christ while the paten contains the Body of Christ.



Monstrance

The Monstrance is an elaborately decorated object used to hold the consecrated host during exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, adoration, benediction, and processions with the Blessed Sacrament.

The word monstrance comes from the Latin verb “to show.” When a host is being displayed in a monstrance it is first placed between two circular glass plates connected by a precious metal that is known as the “luna.” This secures the host in place. The design of the monstrance resembles rays of light.



Ciborium

This vessel is made to hold the consecrated hosts that are used for the Communion of the faithful. Its shape is often like a chalice although it is larger to accommodate more hosts. Because it holds the Body of Christ, it is made of precious metal and has a lid so the hosts can be stored properly in the Tabernacle.



Incense and Thurible

Incense is burned in the Thurible during the liturgy as a visual reference of the prayers we offer. We also use incense as a sign of honoring when the celebrant incenses the symbols of Christ, including the altar, the Gospel Book, the eucharistic elements, the priest the people of God, the cross and the Paschal Candle. When we honor the people and these objects, we honor Christ.



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If you have suggestion for a topic or topics you would like to be the subject of a future article or have any questions on this article please contact us via email at engagingdisciples@ihmparish.net