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FROM WORSHIP TO WORLD SENT FORTH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

We are sent forth from Mass with the mission to become the presence of the risen Lord in our world—in our time and place. *By Fr. Thomas Richstatter, OFM, STD*



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Once heard a Scripture scholar describe the Bible as a “story of oases and journeys.” He recalled leading a group of archaeology students through the Egyptian desert. Everyone was hot, sweaty, and tired. Each time the group came upon an oasis, the students ran, took off their shoes, and soaked their feet in the water.

“We wanted to stay there forever,” he said. “But you can’t stay at the oasis; you have to get up and continue the journey through the desert if you’re going to arrive at the site of the next dig.”

FROM OASIS TO JOURNEY

At each Mass, we gather with other believers and seekers. We lay down our burdens at the door of the church so we might be encouraged by the stories of God’s constant love. We share our sacred meal and experience a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. These first three movements of the Mass—gathering (introductory rites), storytelling (Liturgy of the Word), and meal sharing (Liturgy of the Eucharist)—are something of an oasis in our Christian journey.

And once we’re refreshed, encouraged, and strengthened for the journey ahead, it’s time to “dry off our feet and put on our shoes”—like the students on that Egyptian dig. We take up the burdens we left at the church door and return to our daily lives. The fourth and final part of the Mass, commissioning (concluding rite), helps us transition from the oasis of worship to the journey that is our life in the world.

The commissioning or concluding rite of the Mass is relatively short and simple: the announcements, the dismissal and a blessing, and, usually, a concluding hymn. This final part of the Mass is so brief that you might ask: *Why stay? Why not just leave and go home after receiving Communion?*

The reason I want to stay to the end is because I didn’t come to Mass merely to receive holy Communion. I came to share in a sacred meal, and, at meals, we don’t eat and run. After sharing a meal, we need time to take our leave and say goodbye to our companions. And at the eucharistic meal, we need transition time—time to move from oasis to journey.

A JOURNEY FOR ALL

For many Catholics, the time of intimate prayer after holy Communion is like an oasis in the desert. Often, I’d like to stay there forever and relish the closeness of the Lord! Perhaps that’s what Peter, James, and John experienced on the mountain of the transfiguration. To paraphrase Peter: “Lord, it’s good to be here. This is really great! Let’s build dwellings and stay here forever!” (Matthew 17:1–8).

But the gospels tell us that Jesus had a different idea. Peter, James, and John had to go back down the mountain and continue their journey. There were sick people waiting to be healed, demons to be cast out, doubts and fears to be dispelled.

Like Peter, James, and John, we have to leave the oasis of Communion and continue down the mountain on our



Christian journey. We, too, will find people who need to be healed, evils to be eradicated, fearful people waiting for our encouragement and support.

OASIS AND SENDING FORTH

The four movements of the Eucharist (gathering, storytelling, meal sharing, and commissioning) are modeled on the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35). On the Sunday following Jesus’ crucifixion, two disciples are returning home to Emmaus from Jerusalem when they are joined by a stranger. This man (1) *gathers* with them. They (2) *tell their story* and recall the Scriptures. They invite the stranger into their home and, (3) in *sharing their meal*, they recognize him “in the breaking of the bread.” They (4) *return to Jerusalem* to bring the good news to the other disciples.

This must have been an oasis moment for the two disciples! They’d thought that Jesus was dead and buried. Now here he’s at table with them, sharing word and bread and life! How they must have wanted that moment to last forever!

But again, Jesus has a different idea, and what happens next in the story is very important for our understanding of the Eucharist. Jesus doesn’t permit the two disciples to just sit there, resting in the joy of his presence. “Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight”

(Luke 24:31). *He vanished from their sight!* And the disciples immediately get up from the table and—even though the hour is late—they dash back to Jerusalem to tell the others: “He has risen!”

The fourth part of the Eucharist is the “commissioning.” We, like the disciples of Emmaus, are sent forth from the Eucharist to “announce the Gospel of the Lord,” “glorifying the Lord” by our lives. We’re commissioned—sent forth on mission—by our encounter with the risen Lord at the Eucharist. In our daily lives, we’re to continue the biblical theme of oasis and journey.

PRAYING FOR CHANGE

Our return to the world is an essential element of the Mass. When we examine the structure and function of the eucharistic prayer (the central prayer of the Mass), we see that the petition of the prayer—the *epiclesis* or invocation of the Holy Spirit—asks for a twofold transformation. We pray that (1) the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ and that (2) the Holy Spirit changes us, we who eat and drink, into the Body and Blood of Christ.

In Eucharistic Prayer 3, for example, we ask God to make the bread and wine holy by the power of the Spirit, “that they may become the Body and Blood of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ.” Following the mystery of faith, we pray, “Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ.” We ask that the Holy Spirit change not only the *bread and wine* but also *us*!

This second change—of us into “one body, one spirit in Christ”—was very real for the early Church. It was impressed on St. Paul from the day he was knocked to the ground on the way to Damascus and heard the risen Lord ask: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:4, emphasis added). He realized that Christ is so united with us that what we do to one another we do to him.

BECOMING THE CHANGE

This is why Paul became so irritated when he observed how the Corinthians celebrated the Eucharist. He scolded them because when they came together for the Eucharist, the poor stayed hungry while the rich had so much to eat and drink that they got drunk! (1 Corinthians 11:17–22).

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we must be attentive to both parts of the epiclesis/invocation. We recognize Christ not only in the bread and wine, but also in his body, the Church—including the poor, the marginalized, and those whom the world considers worthless. “For,”

‘ITE, MISSA EST’

During the centuries when the Roman-rite Mass was celebrated in Latin, the last thing the people heard the priest say was, “*Ite, missa est.*” The word *Mass* probably comes from “*Ite, missa est.*” *Ite* means “Go!” And *missa* is a technical term for a formal dismissal.

Often what we hear last sticks in our memory. (In the parking lot after Mass, people are more likely to remember the final hymn than the homily or gospel!) This dismissal (*missa*) became the name for the entire celebration.



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CHRIST HAS NO BODY

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks

Compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which he
walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with
which he blesses all the
world.

Christ has no body now on
earth but yours.

—Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)

DIG DEEPER

When has sharing the good news of God’s love enlivened your own faith?

Does the Mass sometimes feel like an oasis? Do you leave Mass recommitted to the journey?

What more does your membership in the body of Christ call you to do for the poor?

Paul writes, “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body [the Church] eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:29).

OUR PART IN GOD’S PLAN

I refer to this twofold, inclusive understanding of Christ’s presence as the “Easter Sunday” dimension of the Eucharist. The early Church’s Easter experience of the risen Christ was that of the conversion insight of St. Paul: Christ identifies himself with the poor.

The eucharistic prayer, with its twofold epiclesis/invocation, continually reminds us of this reality. When we ask the Holy Spirit to transform us into the body of Christ, we are asking that the Holy Spirit enable us to take our part in God’s great and mysterious plan for creation. We pray that we become the presence of the risen Lord in our world, in our time and place.

NO ARMS BUT OURS

When I was a high-school student at our Franciscan seminary in Cincinnati, there was a fire at the diocesan seminary across town. We invited the diocesan seminarians to come live with us while their building was repaired. They brought along the crucifix that had hung in their now-ruined chapel. Fire had destroyed the arms of the corpus, and the charred, armless image was displayed with the inscription: “I have no arms but yours!”

That crucifix made a lasting impression on me and my understanding of the Eucharist. At each Mass, we ask the Holy

Spirit to make our arms Christ’s arms, reaching out to heal and comfort. We pray that our words become Christ’s words of love and forgiveness and our hands become Christ’s hands, lifting up the fallen, discouraged, and outcast. Reaching out to the poor is at the heart of our Christian journey: “The Eucharist commits us to the poor” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1397).

And when I think of those archaeology students with their feet in the cooling waters of the oasis, I know they don’t really want to stay at the oasis forever. As peaceful and refreshing as the oasis may be, the real thrill of being an archaeologist is in doing archaeology, and for that, one must leave the oasis and journey on to the site of the next dig.

The same is true with our Christian life. As enjoyable and refreshing as it may be to bask in the presence of the Eucharist, the real thrill and excitement of Christian life is found in the journey, the mission: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Thomas Richstatter, OFM, has a doctorate in theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris. A popular writer and lecturer, Fr. Richstatter teaches sacramental and liturgical theology at Saint Meinrad (Indiana) Seminary and School of Theology.

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