

The Eucharist through the Middle Ages

By the time of the Peace of the Church (313 AD), when Christianity became tolerated, the basic shape of the Mass was established: a liturgy of the Word (readings, homily, prayers), followed by the liturgy of the Eucharist (taking the gifts of the people, freestyle thanksgiving prayer, breaking and distribution). At the same time the main doctrinal tenets of the Christian faith were agreed at the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD). However, the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire (380 AD) meant that it changed from being a private to being a public religion and this brought about many significant developments in the style of Christian worship.

The Setting

Buildings set aside for worship: churches where “the Church” could meet.
Use of pagan basilicas, with a throne in the apse: awareness of hierarchy.
Icon of Christ in majesty replaces Good Shepherd.
Church calendar develops because expectation of the end of the world is lost.

Ceremonial

Use of vestments, lights, incense taken from imperial court: sets priests apart.
Liturgy becomes a spectacle rather than a gathering of a dedicated few.
In the East monks become the professional Christians.
Ordinary people feel unworthy: emphasis on fasting in preparation for communion.
Let all mortal flesh keep silence, And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded, For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, Our full homage to demand.
Dismissal of catechumens becomes rare: no longer sense of two parts.

Words

Element of worship strengthened in first part: entrance chant, opening prayer, litany added (litany popular in East but eventually simplified to Kyries in West).
Gloria: taken from the East but only for very limited use.
Creed added in some places as a test before communion (always used in East where heresy was more common; restricted to Sundays in West - and much later).

From the 4th century there was a gradual separation between the East and West of the Roman Empire, beginning with the loss of a common language. Educated people in the West, especially in Italy, knew Greek into the 300's and had been happy to worship in it; but Latin was the common language and c. 400 Jerome made a complete translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate - in the vulgar tongue). For a time the Mass prayers were in Greek and the readings in Latin, but under pressure from Christians from North Africa Latin was gradually accepted in Rome as the normal language of worship and became the language of the whole of Western Europe. Greek was more flowery, poetic, philosophical. Latin was brief, practical, juridical, military. From this time we get two distinct traditions. From the 6th century the organization of the Roman Empire began to break down. Northern tribes invaded the more civilized southern countries so communication and central control were poor. That allowed for variety in the West. From the 7th century the Muslims became a major force in the homelands of Christianity (the Middle East) so the Eastern Church was weakened and isolated. Its liturgical development was frozen in time, and would seem very elaborate to us in the West.

<p><u>The East - for 1500 years 3 liturgies have been in continuous use.</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Liturgy of St James (the oldest - used in Jerusalem). 2. The Liturgy of St John Chrysostom (the normal Orthodox liturgy today, based on the Eucharist of West Syria from the time when St John was bishop (370-398) of Syrian Antioch). 3. The Liturgy of St Basil (used on ten days each year, dating back to St Basil of Caesarea who died in 379. He added a lot of scripture and lengthened the prayers). <p>These forms of the Eucharist were eventually celebrated behind a screen (iconostasis) - excluding the people .</p>	<p><u>The West - various families of liturgies, sometimes influencing each other and constantly developing.</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Roman Rite (elegant, direct, economical - helped by a succession of strong Popes) 2. The Ambrosian Rite (used in the area around Milan) 3. Gallican Rites (from northern Europe, especially France; prayers are lengthier and more elaborate than in Rome, more Eastern). 4. Mozarabic/Gothic Rite (from Spain, also showing Eastern influences; survived a long time because of Muslim occupation of Spain). <p>Rome could not impose unity.</p>
---	---

Between 500 and 800 AD there was tremendous variety because of unstable political conditions outside Rome. Priests sometimes returned to the ancient tradition of improvising the Eucharistic prayer. In Rome the Mass of the Pope became the standard: ceremonies were written down, nothing was improvised, the Eucharistic Prayer became fixed (the people, however, were now only spectators).

There was more uniformity from the time that Charlemagne became King of the Franks (768) and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. With the help of the British Benedictine monk Alcuin he imposed a compromise rite, Roman with some Gallican additions, which is more or less what we have today. Good copyists in monasteries made this available. However, around the basic structure there was great variation because of the influence of the calendar - pleasing the locals.

We should be aware, however, that the medieval Mass had a very different feel to the ancient “breaking of bread” of the early Christians.

1. The music of the chants became more important than the words, and even the Kyrie and Gloria were extended for the sake of music.
2. A penitential rite was introduced at the beginning of Mass in the 10th century.
3. The homily and intercessions disappeared. Later sermons were moral instructions, not explanations of Scripture (which people could not understand).
4. Private prayers for the priest were introduced at the offertory and before communion (but no prayers for the laity because most did not take communion).
5. A blessing was introduced at the end - not necessary in earlier times.
6. Dioceses outside Italy were large. Thus priests became the regular delegates of the bishop for saying Mass., using a simplified rite. In time priests (especially monks) wanted to say Mass daily - and lay people wanted to have Masses said for the dead - so “Low Mass” became the norm instead of the full “High Mass”.
7. The lay people’s part was reduced to seeing (not much hearing because the priest now was turned away from the people and Latin was not understood anyway). Thus the Elevation of the Host became the climax of the Mass.
8. Eventually lay people got on with their own prayers (such as the Rosary) while the priest got on with the Mass - the sense of the Christian family gathering around the Lord’s table had been completely lost. Instead of community worship people’s prayer had become “me and my God”, opening the door to Protestantism.