

FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY



THE MASS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Every Sacred Sunday



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WELCOME

WHY THIS SERIES?

We are blessed to live in a time where so much information is readily available about our Church's over 2,000 years of history - though it's actually more than that, as much of our ritual is rooted in Judaism, as we'll dive into in this series!

The volume of information available about the history of the Mass is so incredible, there is a risk of eternally researching without taking time to synthesize, reflect, and let knowledge lead us to deeper encounter with Christ. With this in mind, we focused this guide on a few key questions:

Why do we call it "Mass" and celebrate on Sunday?
What did early Christian worship look like? What are the historical roots of Eucharistic prayers?

We hope this glimpse into the rich history of the Mass draws you into a deeper personal relationship with Christ. Let's dive in!



FROM SABBATH

TO SUNDAY



PART I

Biblical roots of Sunday Mass:
Why do we call it "Mass"?

Why do we call it "Mass"?

The Mass originally went by many names: the Breaking of Bread, the Offering, the Oblation, the Sacrifice. Some called it the Liturgy, from the Greek word *leitourgia*, meaning “public service.” Others called it the Sacrament, the Mysteries, or the Table of the Lord. Overwhelmingly, it was simply called “the Eucharist”—from the Greek *eucharistia*—meaning “thanksgiving,” as the Gospel writers unanimously used the expression “give thanks” at the moment of consecration at the Last Supper (Mark 14:23, Matthew 26:27, Luke 22:17).

In the ancient world, it was customary to close an assembly with a formal dismissal. Still a product of their culture, the early Christians would conclude every *eucharistia* in the same way: “*Ite, missa est*” or “Go, it is ended,” much like we still do today. When Empress Justina attempted to take the basilicas from the Catholics, Bishop St. Ambrose of Milan wrote to his sister on Easter in 386 AD, “*Missam facere coepi*” — “I kept to my duty and began to say Mass.” This is the earliest concrete account the Church has of the use of the word Mass to refer to the liturgy of the Eucharist. Based on the casual language he used, we can assume that the word “Mass” was commonly used by this time.



FROM SABBATH

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Part II

Biblical Roots of Sunday Mass:
Why do we celebrate Mass on Sunday instead of Saturday?

From Saturday to Sunday

In Part I, we learned how the early Christians referred to the celebration of the Eucharist as the “Mass” just as we do! But when did the early Christians celebrate Mass? We know that the Lord’s Day replaced the Sabbath observed on Saturday, but was this actually on a Sunday?

Scripture shows us that not only was early Christian worship indeed on Sunday, but we can trace that all the way back to the very first disciples on Easter Sunday. All over the New Testament, we see that “the first day of the week” to the early Church referred to Sunday. Mark 16:1 notes that Jesus rose “when the Sabbath was over”, and calls this the first day of the week. Importantly, the Gospels unanimously cite that “on the first day of the week” Mary Magdalene went to Jesus’s tomb but found it empty (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1).

That evening, Jesus visited the disciples in the upper room and revealed himself to them. As if to make sure we haven’t forgotten, John once again notes that this was on “the first day of the week” (Jn 20:19). Do we remember what happened before Jesus visited the disciples in the upper room? He spoke to two disciples, Cleopas and one other, as they were traveling to Emmaus. Upon arrival, they convinced Him to stay with them for the night.



“And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:30-31). This means that on the day Jesus rose from the dead -- the very first Easter Sunday - Jesus celebrated Mass with two disciples. Luke tells us that they immediately left for Jerusalem, as Jesus had instructed while they were walking to Emmaus. In Jerusalem, they met with the other disciples and learned that Jesus had made Himself known to Peter earlier that day. While they were talking, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room (Luke 24:36; John 20:19).

Counting like it's AD 30

As we all know, Thomas wasn't there during this visit, and said he wouldn't believe Jesus was alive unless he touched Christ's wounds himself. Jesus

came back to show him — but have you noticed when Jesus came back? The Gospel of John describes that Jesus returned “eight days later” (Jn 20:26), when the disciples were meeting again for worship. In ancient times, the current day would always be counted as Day 1. That means that in this passage, “the first day of the week,” Sunday, was “Day 1”, and “Day 8” would be the following Sunday. This means that Jesus came back to Thomas and the disciples again on a Sunday.

Furthermore, Scripture directly tells us that the apostles and disciples celebrated Mass on Sunday. Acts 20:7 says: “On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them.” So we know that not only did Jesus break bread on Easter Sunday, but St. Paul was breaking bread with the very first Christians on Sundays.

Breaking bread on Sunday

The faithful went on to continue that model by worshiping twice every weekend: first by hearing the Old Testament at synagogue on Saturday, and then breaking bread in Christian homes on Sunday. The earliest extant writing called the Didache (“Teaching” in Greek) describes itself as an authoritative teaching of the Apostles. This is a significant piece of writing as scholars agree that it was likely written between 50-100 AD, making it as old (or possibly older) as parts of the New Testament. The Didache says, “On the Lord’s own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks.” This is important because it confirms that the early Church was celebrating Mass, “breaking bread,” on Sundays from the very beginning.



FROM SABBATH

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PART III

The Jewish roots of early Christian worship:
What did the celebration of Mass look like for early Christians?

Jewish roots of the early Church

This early Christian worship of the Mass, starting with its institution at the Last Supper, was the start of an unbroken chain of Christians celebrating "Mass" on Sundays, as discussed in Part I and II. But what did the early Christians experience when they worshiped and broke bread? To start to understand this, we first remind ourselves of a key fact – Christian worship flowed directly from Jewish worship.

Jesus was Jewish. His apostles were Jewish, and they lived like Jews. From this perspective, it makes sense that Christian rituals are rooted in Jewish practice. But what does that mean? They would attend synagogue where rabbis taught from the Law and the prophets, where the congregation prayed from psalms and other ritual prayers. The Sabbath included a “fellowship meal,” (chaburah) with the blessing of bread and wine. At the Temple, Jews would participate in sacrifices offered by the faithful through the priest. The “showbread,” or “bread of the presence” was kept near the heart of the Temple.



From Sabbath to Sunday



A two-part celebration

We also know that the early Christians met twice in a weekend: first in a meeting to hear the Scriptures, and later in the day to celebrate the Eucharist. For a brief period, this first meeting was actually in the synagogue at Sabbath; it was a safe place to gather and hear the Word of God. At the time, there was no “New Testament” to incorporate, as those books, letters, and Gospels were still being written and lived out.

Not much time passed before the Christians began to have their own meetings to read Scriptures (called “lessons”), much like their Jewish counterparts. By the time of Pliny the Younger, a magistrate of Ancient Rome whose writings are invaluable for historical records, the Christians had begun to participate in two separate worship events on their own. He retells an account where a tortured Christian described worship in this way: the Christians would meet on a certain day before sunrise and sing hymns to Christ, proclaim an oath, and depart. Later that day, they would meet again to partake in a meal. While this is not a lot of detail, it’s easy to see in this account the outline of Mass as we know it today.

Every Sacred Sunday

Liturgy of the Word

We can see similarities between the early Mass and how we worship today when we look at these “lessons,” or reading from Scripture with preaching after. At the time, there was no formal lectionary with set sections to read, so a reader would begin reciting Biblical texts and continue until the bishop would signal that he should stop. Then the bishop would preach on what the congregation just heard. Around 324-420 A.D, an index was created to organize sections before St. Jerome selected the Epistles and Gospels that would be used for the liturgical year. This index of sections and selections became our traditional missal that we have today. That means the Church has followed more or less the same liturgical calendar since the late-4th and early-5th centuries.

One united celebration

Over time, the two separate worship events of the singing of hymns and the sacrificial meal became one united event. However, only the baptized were allowed to be present for the consecration. The non-baptized would be excused following the homily. The two parts of the Mass were known as the missa catechumenorum and missa fidelium, or Mass of the catechumens and Mass of the faithful. By the ninth century, the practice of dismissing the non-baptized fell out of use, and the entire event was just called missa, or “Mass”. This structure of the liturgy is still used today as we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.



FROM SABBATH

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PART IV

Celebrating the Eucharist in the early Church:
What are the origins of the Eucharistic prayers?

Liturgy of the Eucharist

When it comes to the very first Christians, we don't have a formalized Order of Mass to look back on. This makes sense for many reasons, the first and foremost being that the first Christians were severely persecuted. Their main focus was on celebrating Mass without having to lose their lives. Combined with the lack of literacy among the faithful, they did not have any reason or means to keep record of what it was like. Often under cover of night, they would arrive at someone's home, break bread, and quietly leave.



Despite this, there are some things we do know. The formula used during the consecration was the same, though not word-for-word, as what we have today. Roughly 20 years after Pentecost, St. Paul gave instructions for the consecration in his letter to the Corinthians. St. Paul writes around 52-55 AD:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. (1 Cor 11:23-27)

This demonstrates the five essential elements necessary for consecration: bread and wine are brought to the altar, the celebrant gives thanks over the gifts, the bread is taken and words of consecration are spoken, wine is taken and words of consecration are spoken, and the consecrated Host is broken and distributed among the faithful alongside the Chalice. This passage of Scripture shows that St. Paul and the Apostolic Christians were "breaking bread" the same way that we are 2,000 years later!

From generation to generation

From here, the liturgy developed organically, adding rituals and prayers as the times allowed, while still keeping the same overall structure throughout time. Though the liturgy lacked a formalized ritual for the first two centuries, we do know that the early Christians read “lessons” from Scripture (as we discussed in Part III), recited Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer, and celebrated the Eucharist. We know that early worship included kneeling and standing for prayer along with the passing of peace, or the kiss of peace, inherited from the synagogue. The responses given, along with the general formulas, were already known to the faithful, so there was no need for any formal instruction about how to participate. For example, the *chaburah* mentioned here included ritual prayers (*berakoth*) like: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine... Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” Does that sound familiar?



During times of persecution, the Mass was simple and brief. But as Christianity became legal, especially under Constantine the Great (272-337) and Theodosius I (347-395), the ritual was able to expand, to become more intricate, with emphasis on the most important moments of worship. The wealthy were able to openly donate to the Sacrifice with gold and silver chalices and dishes, giving all glory to God in the Eucharist. Despite these developments, the essential form and structure of the Mass is largely unchanged in the last 2,000 years.



From Sabbath to Sunday

Every Sacred Sunday

DIVE DEEPER

What a beautiful history we can
trace to the early Church!

Our prayer is that this
knowledge of God's Church
draws you into a deeper personal
relationship with Christ.
Amen!

If you'd like to dive
deeper, here are some of
the sources we used for
further reading:



The Mass of the Early Christians
Mike Aquilina

A Biblical Walk Through the Mass
Edward Sri

A Short History of the Roman Mass
Michael Davies

The Lamb's Supper
Scott Hahn



EVERY SACRED SUNDAY

ABOUT US

Hello from Kassie & Christie, co-founders of Every Sacred Sunday! We were in a Bible study together in 2017 when the Holy Spirit placed the idea on our hearts to publish

Mass journals that were beautiful, functional, and 100% Catholic. Thanks for joining us!



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope you loved this series! For more resources, see below.

Questions? Email us at hello@everysacredsunday.com



ESS Catholic Mass Journal

everysacredsunday.com/journal

A keepsake quality hardcover journal with full Sunday Mass readings and space for notes to help you prepare and pray.



The Sunday Series

everysacredsunday.com/sundayseries

Free Weekly reflections on the Sunday Mass readings from a variety of Catholic writers, sent directly to your inbox.



Covenant Wedding Planner

www.covenantco.org

This series was written by Marissa Rankin, longtime editor for Every Sacred Sunday and founder of Covenant Co, wedding planners for Catholic brides.