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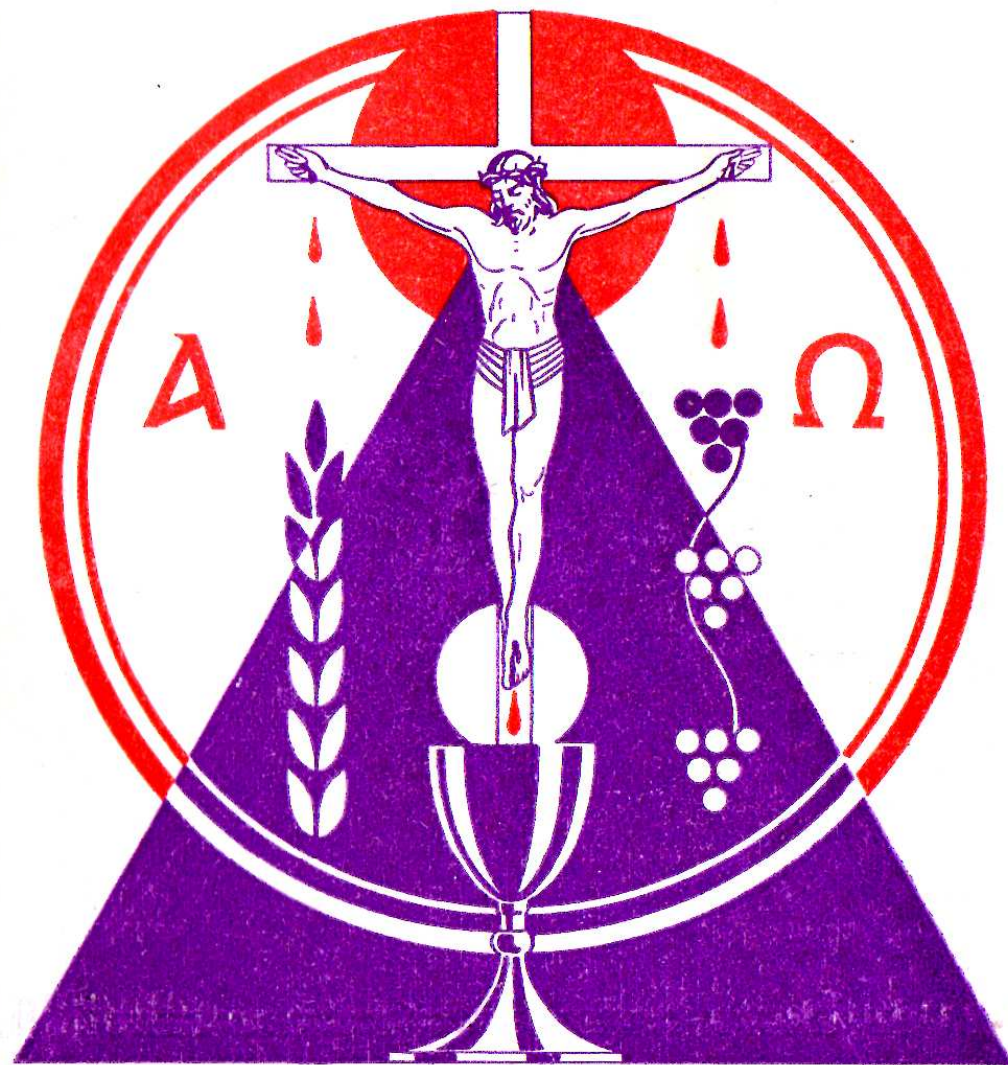
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I LIKE MASS

by Rev. L. Sheil, S.J.



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I LIKE MASS

BY

REV. L. SHEIL, S.J.

Mass brings into our life and company Jesus, body and soul. Mass gives us Jesus wounded and glorious,—to remind us of His Death, to be our Sacrifice to His Father, and to be our Food. Mass lays Him on our altar under the Sacramental Sign. Under the white species of the Bread and the purple of the Wine, we have Himself, made really present by an action which is a memorial and mystical representation of His Death. He brings us the graces that His Death wins for us, the fruit of our redemption. All these elements of the Mass are put before us in the prayer of St. Thomas:

O God who under a wonderful *Sacrament* hast given us a *Memorial* of

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Thy passion, grant us so to venerate the *Mystery* of Thy Body and Blood that we may ever receive the *Fruit* of Thy redemption.

This booklet will deal only with the Mass as a memorial of the Passion. It tries to respond to Our Lord's touching words: "Do this in remembrance of Me." It develops St. Paul's sentence: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this chalice, you show forth the death of the Lord." It leaves for another place the explanation of how Mass is a sacrifice, and applies to us the fruit of His redemption.

In an effort to satisfy these words of Our Lord and of St. Paul, let us make of our Mass an hour on Calvary. Let us make rich use of our God-given power of imagination. This faculty enables us to live the past over again. We can get back into the past, for-

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getting the present. Nay, past and present will be as one to us. Memory and imagination will put us on the hill of Calvary, and make us present at His death. Our sanctuary will become the hill of Calvary, and our altar the cross. We will almost see around it the Roman soldiers, and on its floor the pool of blood.

Nor will this be altogether imagination. On the contrary we shall enter a little into the world of God, into God's timeless eternity. As far as our weak powers permit, we shall see things as God sees them. God's ways are not our ways. We live in a world of time and space which is passing away. To us there is to-day and yesterday and a day 2,000 years ago when Christ died on Calvary. But to God all time is an eternal "Now." The moment of our Mass and the moment of Christ's death are both present to Him. And God's is the lasting reality.

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and ours the transient as we pass into eternity where there is no time.

Similarly, we live in a world of space. To us there is the place of Mass and a place far away where is the hill of Calvary. But to God every place is present. And His is the lasting reality and ours the transient as we pass into the Infinite where space rules us no more.

Hence our imagination brings us near to reality when at Mass it puts us on Calvary at the death of Christ. St. Cyprian said long ago:

“The Sacrifice which we offer is the very Passion of the Lord.”

Helped by these thoughts, let us now turn to the big work of hearing Mass as a memorial of Our Lord's death. We may distinguish four parts in the Mass and four parts in Our Lord's passion.

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1.—THE FIRST PART OF MASS.

The first part is preparatory. It is an act of contrition. The priest goes down to the foot of the altar and, bowing low, says: “I confess . . . that I have sinned . . . through my most grievous fault.”

This serves as a memorial of Our Lord's sorrow in Gethsemani. Memory and imagination enable us to see the woods of Gethsemani. It is nighttime and dark. Overhead the moon is shining. Its light glistens on the leaves of olive trees. In the black shadow under the trees not the priest but Christ bows His face to the ground and grieves for our sins. He sweats with horror; the sweat turns to blood and trickles down His face and lies red on the blades of grass.

We make our act of contrition, and say:
‘I confess that I have sinned exceedingly in

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thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." If we do this with all our hearts, we may be confident that all our sins will be forgiven immediately at this beginning of Mass, provided we intend to go to Confession later if the sin is serious.

Now the priest ascends the altar steps, and as he does so he continues the words of contrition, saying:

"Take away from us our sins, O Lord, that we may be worthy to enter with pure minds into the Holy of Holies."

The altar represents the Body of Christ. Indeed the first Mass-Altar was His Body. On it His Blood was poured out in remission of our sins. Hence the priest kisses the altar. With him we may dare in reverent adoration to kiss the crucified feet of Our Saviour.

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The Celebrant moves over to the book to read the Introit, and returns to the centre of the altar for the Kyrie Eleison. It is an act of contrition in Greek, once the universal language of the Church, before Latin took its place in the Western Church.

"Lord have mercy on us. Christ have mercy on us."

The Gloria in Excelsis follows. The angels began it over Bethlehem on the joyous night of Christmas. We keep it going down the ages:—

"Glory to God on high and peace on earth to men.

We praise thee. We bless thee. We adore thee.

We give thee thanks for thy great glory, Lord God, heavenly King."

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Yet, gay as it is, it too has its note of sorrow for sin.

“Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

Now the priest turns to us and says:

“Dominus vobiscum. May the Lord be with you.”

It reminds us of the awe-inspiring truth that the Christian's body is a tabernacle; God is in our breasts as truly as in the tabernacle, though in a different way. As a phrase of the early Christians has it, we are Christiferi, —Christ-bearers.

The priest is at the book now praying for us, and holding up his hands in the ancient attitude of prayer. His gesture reminds us that the High Priest of our Mass is Jesus Christ, who at His first Mass held up His

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hands while he prayed for us, nor could He take them down because they were nailed to the Cross. This is the time for us to pray for what we want. Our Lord said: “Ask and you will receive.” And our petitions at Mass have special power because they rise to heaven with the prayer of Christ.

When the priest puts down his hands on the book, it is a sign that he has begun the Epistle. In the old days at this point he would face the people and read out a letter he had received from St. Paul or St. Peter, or unroll a papyrus writing of some prophet. Presently he will go to the centre of the altar to say the prayer of the prophet Isaias for clean lips. It seems that the boy prophet was kneeling in the temple, when an angel of God took a burning coal from before the altar, and flying with outspread wings through the air, cleansed the boy's lips with the fiery fragment. So we pray:

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“Cleanse my heart and my lips, O Almighty God, who didst cleanse the lips of the prophet, Isaias with a burning coal.”

Everyone stands for the gospel. Is it to show our reverence for the word of God? Or does it mean that we are ready to fight for the Faith? We sign ourselves on forehead, lips and breast with the cross. The gesture means:

“May God be in my thoughts, and on my tongue, and in my heart.”

The Gospel is always about something that Our Lord did or said. As Mass is a memorial of His death, we may recall that He thrice prophesied His sacrifice:

“The Son of Man will be given up into the hands of the chief priests and scribes,

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who will condemn Him to death; and these will give Him up into the hands of the Gentiles, who will mock Him, and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him; but on the third day He will rise again.”

He explained the reason why He died; that He gave His life for us: “No man takes My life from Me, but I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again;”

And: “The Son of Man is come to lay down His life a redemption for sinners.” And again, with the chalice of Blood in His hands:

“This is the new Testament in My blood which is to be shed for you.”

The Gospel being ended, the priest kisses the book out of reverence for the word of

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God. The server says: "Praise be to thee, O Christ." The Creed may follow. The first, the preparatory part of Mass is ended. We have made our act of contrition with Christ in the Garden of Gethsemani.



2.—THE SECOND PART OF MASS.

The second part of Mass is the Offertory. The priest takes the veil from the chalice. The act reminds us of Our Lord stripped of His clothes on Calvary. He puts the chalice to one side, and takes from it the little gold plate called the Paten. On it is that piece of bread which soon will be changed into Jesus. Raising the Paten to the level of his eyes he offers the bread and Jesus into whom it will be changed, saying:

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"Receive, holy Father, . . . this unspotted sacrifice which I . . . offer You for the . . . sins . . . of all . . . that it may give them . . . everlasting life."

We see here a memorial of the offering which Our Lord must have made on Calvary. We try to reconstruct the scene. Our Lord arrives, dragging His cross. He lets it fall with a crash to the ground. Men strip Him of His garments. He makes His offering, and raising to heaven His bare arms He says like the priest:

"Receive, holy Father, this unspotted sacrifice; (His life and blood), which I offer You for the sins of all that it may give them everlasting life."

Next moment they nail Him to the cross.

This is the time for us to make our offering. We offer to God, along with the sacri-

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fice of Christ, the sacrifice of our daily lives, our work, our sufferings, the efforts we make to keep out of sin, and to take care of our homes, our illnesses, pains and anxieties. We say:

“Receive, holy Father, these our offerings, along with the great sacrifice of Christ, We offer them to You for our sins, and for those we love, that they may bring us everlasting life.”

Now comes the offering of the chalice. The boys have brought up wine and water. This is our offering too. The boys represent us. We cannot all crowd to the altar and bring wine for the sacrifice. But with the small hands of the boys all our hands hold out the wine. It is our share of the sacrifice. It will soon be changed into redeeming Blood.

The priest pours wine into the chalice and then a drop of water. The water spreads in

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the wine and mingles with it. The wine represents the precious substance of Jesus. The water stands for us. As the water is united to the wine, so the hour of Mass unites us for the time with Christ. This union is made more complete by Holy Communion. It will be made perfect in heaven, when, like a drop of water, we will be plunged into God and mingle with His happiness and love and glory. The Church gives us a prayer which suits the occasion:

“O God who in a wonderful manner didst form our human nature, and more wonderfully reform it, grant us by the mystery of this water and wine to be made sharers of His Godhead who deigned to share our human nature, Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord.”

Meanwhile at the centre of the altar the priest raising aloft the chalice offers it to

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God. How lovely is the accompanying prayer:

“We offer Thee, O Lord, the chalice of salvation, beseeching Thy clemency that it may ascend with an odour of sweetness in the sight of Thy Divine Majesty for the salvation of ourselves and of the whole world.”

Now at the side of the altar the priest washes his hands. The action symbolizes the cleansing of soul for which we pray in the beautiful words:

“I will wash my hands among the innocent,
and will stand about Thy altar, O my God,
that I may hear the voice of Thy praise
and tell all Thy wondrous works.

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I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of
Thy house,
and the place where Thy glory dwelleth.”

The celebrant now turns to the people with the words, “Orate, fratres,” “Pray, Brothers,” and going to the book begins himself to pray. This is the time for us to pray for whatever we want for ourselves, our homes, and the Church. “Everyone that asks, receives; and he that seeks, finds; and to him that knocks, it will be opened.”

So ends the second part of Mass, the priest's offering of bread and wine, reminding us of Christ's offering on Calvary, with our own offering of our sacrifices and His.



3.—THE THIRD PART OF MASS.

The third part of Mass is the Consecration. It shows forth the death of the

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Lord. It is introduced by the preface, the prayer of the angels. These celestial spirits doubtless stand around the altar in serried ranks, as the prophet saw them, with faces bright as the sun and wings folded across their feet. With them we say:

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.
Hosanna!

Now must be done what the Lord did the night before He died, and according to His command: "Do this in memory of Me." That holy night Jesus at the last Supper took bread into His hands. No doubt He reminded His disciples of the promise made years before at Capharnaum.

Here is the promise (John vi. 48-57):

"I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the desert and are

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dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven; that if any man eat of it, he may not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is My flesh for the life of the world . . . Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you. He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath everlasting life; and I will raise him up in the last day. For My flesh is meat indeed: and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, abideth in Me, and I in him."

Now was come the time to fulfill the promise. With the bread in His hands Jesus said: "This is—(It was only bread)—My Body." When He had said it, what He said was true. What He had in His hands was not bread any more but His Body, head and

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hand and foot, with the blood running through the veins, kept alive by His soul, made divine by His Godhead.

A moment later He took the chalice in His hands, and said: "This is My blood of the new testament which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins." When He had said it, what He said was true. What He had in His hands was not wine any more, but His blood, running through the veins of His Body, vivified by His soul, and made divine by His Godhead.

This is what the priest does at the moment of Consecration. He obeys the command of Christ: "Do this in memory of Me." He does exactly what Christ did. By the power of God, and speaking in the person of Christ, He changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

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This tremendous action is the essence of the Mass. Here the priest and the people would need to gather together all their powers to understand what they are doing, and to take part intelligently in the great Christian mystery. This the mighty act which lays upon our altars Jesus Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Godhead. To explain it fittingly the priest requires all that he can give of study, prayer and preaching. The people need to exert all their faith, and everything they have of intelligence and imagination. The whole man is needed here. Faith and intelligence combine to tell us what we have under the Sacramental Sign of bread and wine. We have Christ Himself, made really present by an action which is a memorial and mystical representation of His Death; we have Him as the victim whom the Church, in union with His action, offers for her needs; whom we ourselves, as members of the Church may join in offering for our personal needs; and

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through the offering of whom here in the Mass we may obtain an abundant share of the graces merited for us on Calvary.

The Consecration is the Memorial of His Death. It shows forth the death of the Lord. We will need imagination, as well as faith and reason, to bring this home to us. Let us set before our eyes what happened on Calvary. Then, with the eye of the mind we see the hill, the great cross upraised, and Jesus hanging on it, His white body lined with red streams of blood. A scarlet pool lies on the yellow stones that top the hill. Around the cross stands a circle of Roman soldiers who lean upon their spears and watch our Saviour die. By His side stands the Mother of God with her pale face and her eyes upon her Son. At His feet Mary Magdalen kneels. It is the hour of death. Our Lord's dying cry rings out. His head falls upon His breast. His body

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collapses and hangs from the nails. He is dead. He has given His life for me.

The Sacrifice is consummated. The priest kneels and adores; and then raises high the Host for us to see. It is Jesus. The white veil of the Host hides Christ, wounded and glorious. We look up. We seem to see His white Face veiled by a slowly descending curtain of blood. "My Lord and my God."

We kneel in breathless adoration, as we would have done on the hill of Calvary. The Consecration is finished.

The great Mystery has taken place. There is no bread on the altar now, and no wine, for they have been changed into the very Body and Blood of Jesus. Now on the altar Our Lord is truly present. Under the sacramental species His hands with their wounds are there, and His nail-pierced feet, and His

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head once crowned with thorns. His heart, that was stilled in death and pierced by the spear, beats truly there. Let us pray:

“ O Sacred Hands of Jesus, truly present on the altar, I adore You.

I fain would kiss Your sacred wounds.
I am sorry for my sins.

O Sacred Feet of Jesus, truly present on the altar, I adore You.

I kiss Your sacred wounds. I am sorry for my sins.

O Heart of Jesus, stilled by death on the cross, pierced by the spear, and beating now with love for me, make my heart burn with love for You.”

The voice of the priest is raised aloud in prayer. He is saying the Our Father. On the cross Our Lord prayed twice to His Father:

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“ Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.”

And, “ Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.”

So we say the Our Father slowly. The third part of Mass is finished, the Consecration that shows forth the death of Christ.



4.—THE FOURTH PART OF MASS.

The last part of Mass is the Communion. Some important prayers lead up to it. The Agnus Dei:

“ Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

Our Lord is called a lamb for two reasons. He was gentle like a lamb, and when He could destroy His enemies, did it not. Also in the Old Law lambs were sacrificed to God, their white throats cut, and blood

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poured out on the altar. Jesus is the true lamb, whose body was torn open on the cross and blood poured out.

The Communion prayer:

“ Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who by the will of the Father and the cooperation of the Holy Ghost through Thy death didst give life to the world, deliver me by this Thy most holy Body and Blood from all my iniquities and every evil; make me always adhere to Thy commandments; and do not permit me to be ever separated from Thee.”

The Domine non sum dignus:

“ Lord I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof: but say only the word, and my soul shall be healed.”

The centurion said it first, when Jesus was

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coming to heal his servant. Millions have said it since for near two thousand years, and expressed in it their sense of unworthiness, and yet their joyous expectation.

The Communion of the priest and people puts before our eyes what I may call Our Lady's communion on Calvary. Let us try to reconstruct it. When Jesus was dead, men came to take Him off the cross. With tools they pulled the nails out of His feet, and His whole body hung from His hands with His legs dangling loose. They put up a ladder, and took the nail out of one hand, so that He hung off the other, most pitiful to see. His poor mother raised her arms and they lowered Him down to her. His heavy dead weight fell upon her shoulder and breast. She clasped her arms around Him with His cold cheek against hers. But He was too heavy for her, so that she sank to the ground, and they laid Him across her knees with His head fallen back. With her

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left hand she raised His head and her fingers were wet with the blood in His hair. She gazed on His torn features, and drew the lids down over His glazed eyes, and she was very full of sorrow. This was her Communion on Calvary when her Son came back to her off the cross.

Had one of us been there, what would we have done? Drawn near, I suppose, desiring to help, and knelt in reverent pity. She would have raised her sorrowful eyes, and seeing the tears in ours, she might have held out her Son's pain-twisted hand, and said: "Look at His poor hand. He was very fond of you. Perhaps you would like to kiss His hand?" If only to please her, we would have given a kiss to His cold finger. Then, like any mother distraught with grief, she might have said: "Look at His face. Oh, see these wounds. Would you like to kiss His poor face?" And that would have been our Communion on the hill of Calvary.

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In truth, not very different is our Communion at the altar rails. The priest brings Him to us off the altar-cross. In the white Host His hand and cheek are brought to our lips as for a kiss. We clasp Him more closely than upon our knees, for we lay Him in our breasts. There with the eye of the mind we may gaze upon His wounds and kiss them one by one. His Body remains with us for about a quarter of an hour to receive our adoration. His spiritual presence will remain forever if we do not drive Him from us by grievous sin.

"Ite, missa est," says the priest. The great sacrifice is ended. He will bless us before we go. On the third day Our Saviour rose, and after forty days ascended to His eternal rest. Ascending, He blessed His friends. Now He lifts the priest's hand to bless us:

"May the Almighty God bless you, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

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We close with some practical resolutions about hearing Mass well. Be in time. Enter the church properly. Recall the hill of Calvary, and the death of Christ. Make a reverent genuflection, knee touching the ground, eyes on the tabernacle, a prayer on our lips. Let it be done so reverently that a pagan onlooker would say: 'God must be there.' Bring a book or a beads. Do not leave till the priest has re-entered the sacristy. Go to Communion every time you go to Mass, if you can. Teach the Mass to your children. Hand on to them the love of the Mass which our forefathers passed on to us through centuries of persecution at peril to their lives.

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