



Ask, Father James:

Is it true that Mass begins with the Entrance Procession?

Yes! Mass begins with the procession when the congregation begin to sing the entrance hymn. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal #47 says: "When the people are gathered, and as the Priest enters with the Deacon and ministers, the Entrance Chant begins. Its purpose is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompany the procession of the Priest and ministers."

In a normal parish Mass, the Procession is led by the incense bearer, the Cross bearer, two servers holding candles (plus other altar servers and acolytes or lector carrying in the Word of God of the Book of the Gospels) and the priest, wearing the proper vestments. Theologically, following the doctrine of the real presence, the Symbolism of the cross and candles represents the incarnate Christ walking among his people. The community which gathers for worship does not do so of its own volition; we are gathered by Christ and Christ leads us in the worship; for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:20). This is the reason why everyone stands from the beginning of the entrance procession and hymn because Jesus leads us into the Mass and all through the Mass.

In light of the teaching of real presence of Christ where and whenever the church gathers and in view of the centrality of the Eucharist for the life of the Church, when the Entrance hymn is concluded, the Priest and the faithful, still standing, sign themselves with the Sign of the Cross to acknowledge that we are gathered here in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is important to arrive early for Mass so as not to miss this holy ritual of gathering for worship.

On December 20, 2017, during his weekly general audience, Pope Francis addressed the issue of punctuality at Mass. He said: "It is not a good habit to be looking at the clock" and calculating how much of the beginning of the Mass would be OK to miss and still fulfill one's obligation. Get to Mass early—not late, he said, because it is during the introductory rites that "we begin to adore God in community" and "to prepare the heart for this celebration with the community." After the entrance, the celebrant bows and kisses the altar as an expression of veneration because the altar is a symbol of Christ, the pope said. Everyone gathers around the altar, "not to look at each other. No. But to look at Christ," who is at the center of the community -- not far away.

All the ministries and ministers in the procession are a visible representation of the total worshipping community. When they arrive at the front of the altar, they make a profound bow and the Priest venerates the altar with a kiss and, if appropriate, incenses the cross and the altar and goes to the chair. All Catholics are reminded that the "whole spiritual wealth" of the Church is found in the Eucharist and that the Eucharist is the "source and summit" of the entire Christian life (LG, no. 11). *(Next week we shall discuss the symbolism of beginning the prayers at Mass with the sign of the cross)*

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