

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

THE MASS

**TONY
DOHERTY**

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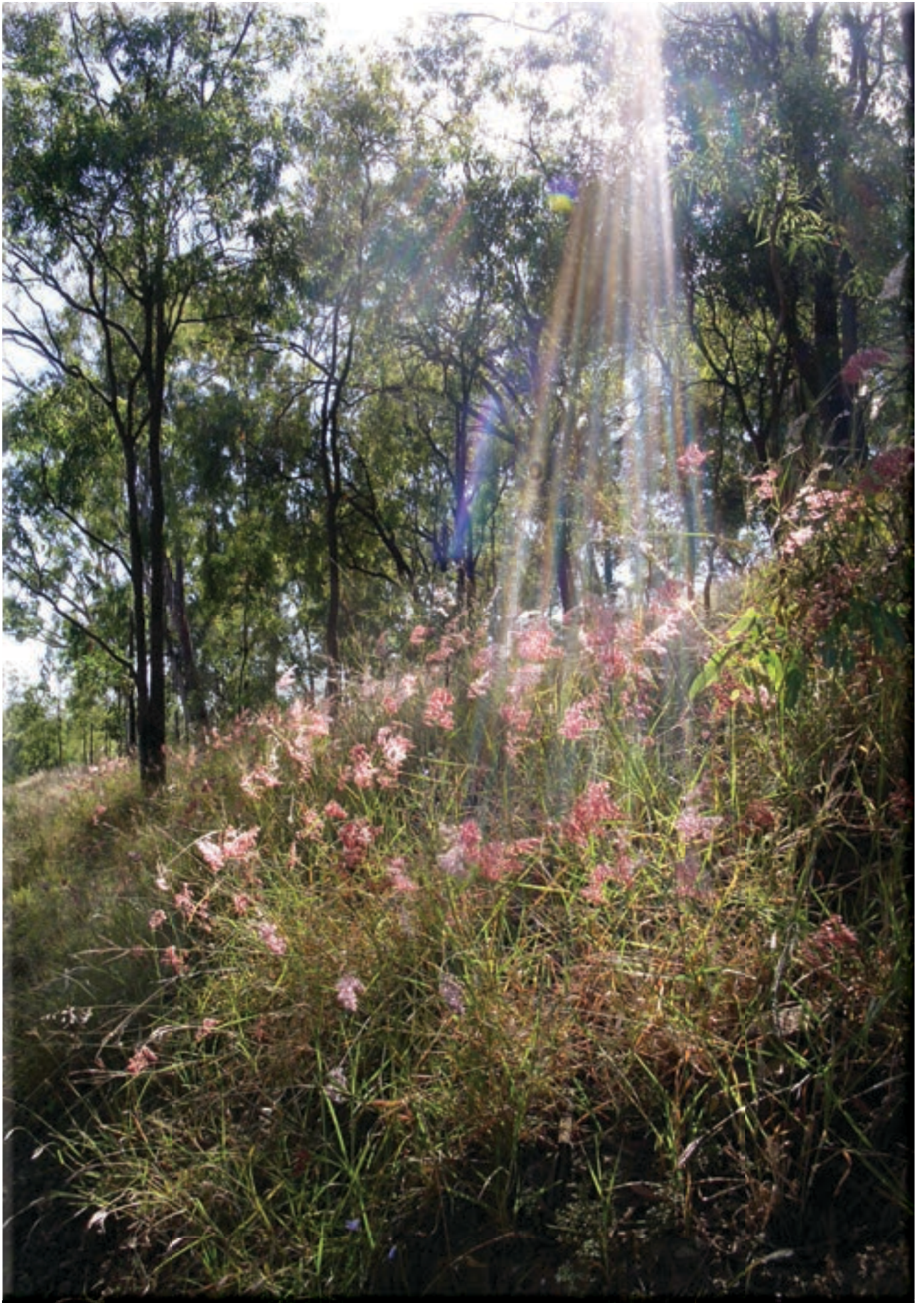
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PREFACE

Capturing the mystery in words

After celebrating Mass each day for close to fifty years, there is something a little uncomfortable about being asked to capture in words what has become as familiar to you as eating and sleeping. It leaves you with a feeling of disquiet, like being asked to submit your own mother to psychological analysis.

How do you explain a mystery? What does the Eucharist really mean? What is going on in the minds of those gathered at a normal Sunday parish Mass? A more daunting question would be what would it look like if people really participated fully in the Mass, acting in a manner unlike that of being passive spectators? Or, even, how often should it be celebrated? Or, simply, what should it be called?

There are so many facets to the diamond. For some it is a meal.

For some it is a sacrifice. Others experience it as a bit of both, a 'sacrifice-meal'. For some it is a ritual act, sacred and set apart. Others like to emphasise the community aspect – the community gathering together, very conscious of one another. For some it is a deeply personal prayer. For others it is a sacramental celebration embracing the entire world.

For some its very essence is expressed in the coming together (the communion) of those present. While for others, the driving force of the prayer nourishes a deep-seated desire to reach out to some wider group. Like the memory of Jesus washing the feet of his young friends, the Mass contains a challenge, for these people, to wash the feet of the

lonely and those broken on life's journey. For some, it is a celebration of a death on Calvary, in which they may find a poignant echo of the grief and distress within their own lives. For others, it is the moment to celebrate the sacredness of life in joy and gratitude. Some celebrate it once a year. Others celebrate it four times a year. Some celebrate it every Sunday and for others it is a daily event of thanksgiving and grace.

For some worshippers it is a celebration of a reconciliation which forgives and unites. For others, unity and reconciliation are pre-requisites for its

proper celebration.

Some call it the Lord's Supper; others call it the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; still others call it the Eucharist. Most commonly, Catholics use the shorthand word with which they are most comfortable, simply 'the Mass'.

Even the elements of bread

and wine at its centre are not quite as uncomplicated as they may seem. The presence of a small wafer and a cup of wine in its simplicity disguise many hidden depths of meaning. There are few domestic delights (for some at least) that match the impact of fresh bread – the aroma and shape of a new steaming loaf coming out of an oven in the early morning. Bread can carry the nostalgic memory of a family table. Breaking the bread has become a symbol of the very act of sharing life itself. And yet, on the other hand, the creation of a loaf of bread destroys much in the making – the crushing of grains of wheat, the milling of flour, the baking in the intense heat of a fire. Many grains are crushed into one loaf. The





very existence of bread is made possible from the destruction of the grain.

And the wine. For countless ages, wine has been a symbol of companionship and human celebration, of weddings and family joy – an ancient elixir designed to lift the spirit and add to the vitality of life itself. Yet, even wine has its darker side. It is created from grapes pulped in a crusher, pressed down and destroyed in the making, left to mature in subterranean containers. In the Eucharist, the crushing of grapes serve as a sober reminder of the blood of Jesus poured out in death, his broken body laid in a grave. It also reminds us of those crushed in the sometimes bitter reality of living or merely surviving in this broken world. It is no wonder that these seemingly uncomplicated gifts of bread and wine have become stark reminders of a powerful symbolism of the hope of new life rising out of death – the central message of the Gospel, which presents us with the story of Christ undergoing his own death and being raised by his Father to a new risen life.

Where do we stop? Who is right? The

Eucharist is all of these things and more. It is rather like a majestic river gum standing at the side of a drought-threatened stream. As the day draws to a close, the towering eucalypt catches the rays of the sun in the ever-changing angles of its glistening leaves. Its many branches are an image of the many layers embraced within the meaning of the Mass, the variety of its many rituals, and the centuries of worshippers from every age and corner of the planet that it has gathered in its embrace. Its hidden roots, thrusting into the river bank, suggest the story of liberation and freedom from slavery embedded in its Jewish past, which hold the central trunk strong and stable.

So I invite you to come and climb this giant tree. Don't be afraid. There will be branches to rest in, shade to cover you and panoramic views to delight you. This book contains an invitation to ascend this tree and explore this view like a curious child, finding in its branches a place to dream and a vantage point to recognise the astonishing gift given to those of us who share the ancient tradition which we call our Mass.

THE INTRODUCTORY RITE

The dreams of a celebrant

Saturday night. 6 p.m. The parish Mass begins in a simple suburban church. The small group of people greet the priest with the opening song:

We come to share our story.

We come to break the bread.

We come to know our rising from the dead.

The celebrant makes his way to the church sanctuary, kisses the altar and turns to greet this little band of believers scattered through the dimly lit church. He reflects on the words of the hymn “We come to share our story...”.

If only we could share our story, he muses.

If only we had the space and the time to share the real experiences of what is happening in our lives.

If only we had the trust and confidence in one another to share the secrets of our fragile hearts. The practical voice within him insists – stop dreaming and get on with Mass.

And yet, each of the people there – the lonely and the bruised, the shy and the poised, the fragile and the strong – have their own stories. They each have their own hungers and their own dreams. *What a parish family could be built if we had the trusting hearts to open ourselves up to others, and then to listen to the stories of frustration and delight, of boredom and of joy, of grief and endless discovery!*

Helen living alone now – widowed for the last fifteen years. At Mass each morning. Susie, a thirty-something gym instructor, restless and searching. She aches to settle down and marry. But it hasn’t worked out...yet. Jonathan and Mari from Malaysia,

emotionally bleeding about their son’s crippling financial debts – and they don’t know how best to help him. Debbie who gave birth to her first child three weeks ago, lights up the pew with the distinctive glow of a new mother, in need of a little sleep but alive and well. Lenka and Jurek recently arrived from a Polish winter in Krakow. Can’t understand English but feel strangely at home within the familiar rhythm of the ritual. Andy, he must be fifteen by now, struggling with his new high school,

quiet and a little too reserved for his boisterous classmates.

And dozens of others, all with their own story – some lifetime believers, some half-believers, others once-upon-a-time-believers but still strangely curious. A sprinkling of those attending are not even Catholic but may come from an Anglican or Uniting Church tradition.

Even a couple of Buddhists may be in attendance. Nothing abnormal – just another Sunday congregation; the priest is quite used to it.

Jonathan Livingstone Seagull was a best-selling book which told the story of a seabird feeling deeply dissatisfied with life, restless for wider horizons and a broader sky to explore. This powerful little parable, of the hunger within each person to search and explore life more fully, still touches deep-down nerves in contemporary audiences. Strong parables contain a certain ageless genius.

The little seagull’s hunger finds an echo in the



restless spirit within each one of us. Thousands of readers still identify closely with that itch. Their life journey, they feel, has lost some of its music. The dreams they once cherished have become domesticated. The lonely little seagull has found a nest in their hearts.

Looking around the church, the priest asks himself – *what are these faithful people gathered in this church really searching for?* And more to the point, *how can he break open the Eucharist and offer them food to nourish their searching spirits and strengthen them on their sometimes frustrating but often courageous journey?*

*We are called to heal the broken,
to be hope for the poor
we are called to feed the hungry at our door.*

Life contains both its prose and its poetry. This ancient celebration of Mass, the celebrant believes, is the brilliantly simple sacrament which brings life's prose and its poetry into balance. The everyday

stuff of life is the prose – the grinding obligations of work; the ambiguity of human friendship; the constant responsibility for other family members; the aches and pains of an ageing body; the compulsions and addictions of a consumer society.

And yet the poetry of this age-old Catholic faith of ours holds the belief that we are immersed in mystery, that our lives are more than they seem, that we belong to each other and to a swirling universe whose energy resides in an ever-present, creator God.

*Bread of life and cup of promise
In this meal we all are one
In our dying and in our rising
May your kingdom come.*

Clearing his throat, the celebrant intones:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

*We come to share our story.
We come to break the bread.
We come to know our rising from the dead.*

*We are called to heal the broken,
to be hope for the poor
we are called to feed the hungry at our door.*

*Bread of life and cup of promise
In this meal we all are one
In our dying and in our rising
May your kingdom come.*

from "Song of the Body of Christ" by David Haas

DID YOU KNOW

Some things about the Mass

- ☞ Catholics go to Mass on Sundays because they believe it is central to their lives as Christians.
- ☞ Sunday was the day the Father raised Jesus from the dead.
- ☞ Jesus is really present in the Eucharist. A believer receives the body and blood of Christ under the form of bread and wine, which we call Holy Communion.
- ☞ At times, for practical reasons, communion is simply offered under the form of bread.
- ☞ The Mass can be understood to have two parts – the readings from the Bible (called the Liturgy of the Word) and the prayer over the bread and wine (called the Liturgy of the Eucharist). This Eucharist is then shared among those who attend the Mass.
- ☞ Bells are rung to indicate important moments in the Eucharist.
- ☞ The first part of the Mass (the Liturgy of the Word) is based on the ancient Jewish synagogue service.
- ☞ The second part of Mass (the Liturgy of the Eucharist) is based on our understanding of what happened at the Last Supper.
- ☞ Many ancient cathedrals are designed to have the Mass celebrated on an altar far removed from the people – to emphasise the mystery that is being enacted.
- ☞ In some Eastern churches, for the same reason, the Eucharistic Prayer even takes place behind a screen hidden from the people.
- ☞ Now, more frequently, the altar is placed in the centre of the church or, at least, closer to the people in order to emphasise the crucial role of the people of God in the celebration.
- ☞ Following the Second Vatican Council's movement for renewal of the way Catholics pray, the Mass began to be celebrated with the priest facing the people. This was a return to the most ancient tradition.
- ☞ Catholics use unleavened bread (without yeast) for the Eucharist but most Eastern churches use leavened bread.

The Sign of the Cross

No other simple physical gesture is so widespread among Catholics as this sign.

Life's experiences, great and small, holy and horrendous, are marked by this handmade echo of the crucifixion. As men and women who believe in the Risen Christ, the God and man who died on a wooden cross long centuries ago, we use this sign. Scholars trace the practice as far back as the year 110, by which time it was already established as a common gesture among Christians – most common, apparently, among those Christian communities

associated with St Paul. It is a small miracle, perhaps, that this gesture has persisted unchanged throughout many centuries and many cultures.

Simple, powerful, poignant, the Sign of the Cross is an action like the Mass, in which we sit down to table fellowship with one another and remember the Last Supper, or a baptism, where we remember John the Baptist pouring water from the river Jordan over Jesus, his cousin.

As believers enter a church, they take water and bless themselves, which becomes an uncomplicated and potent

reminder of the implications of being a baptised person.

"Such a ferocious and brave notion," remarks American essayist Brian Doyle, "to be hinted at by such a simple motion, and the gesture lasting perhaps all of four seconds, if you touch all the bases and don't rush. But as simple as the Sign of the Cross is, it carries a brave weight: it names the Trinity, celebrates the Creator, and brings home all the power of faith to the brush of fingers in skin and bone and belly."

A sign which helps us to remember that we have a 'companion' on the road.



An early description of the Mass

Around the year 155, an early Christian philosopher, Justin Martyr wrote an open letter to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius to explain what Christians did:

On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or the country gather in the same place.

The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits.

When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things.

Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves...and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.

When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss.

Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren.

He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and for a considerable time he gives thanks that we have been judged worthy of these gifts.

When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to the acclamation by saying: 'Amen'.

When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'eucharisted' bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1345