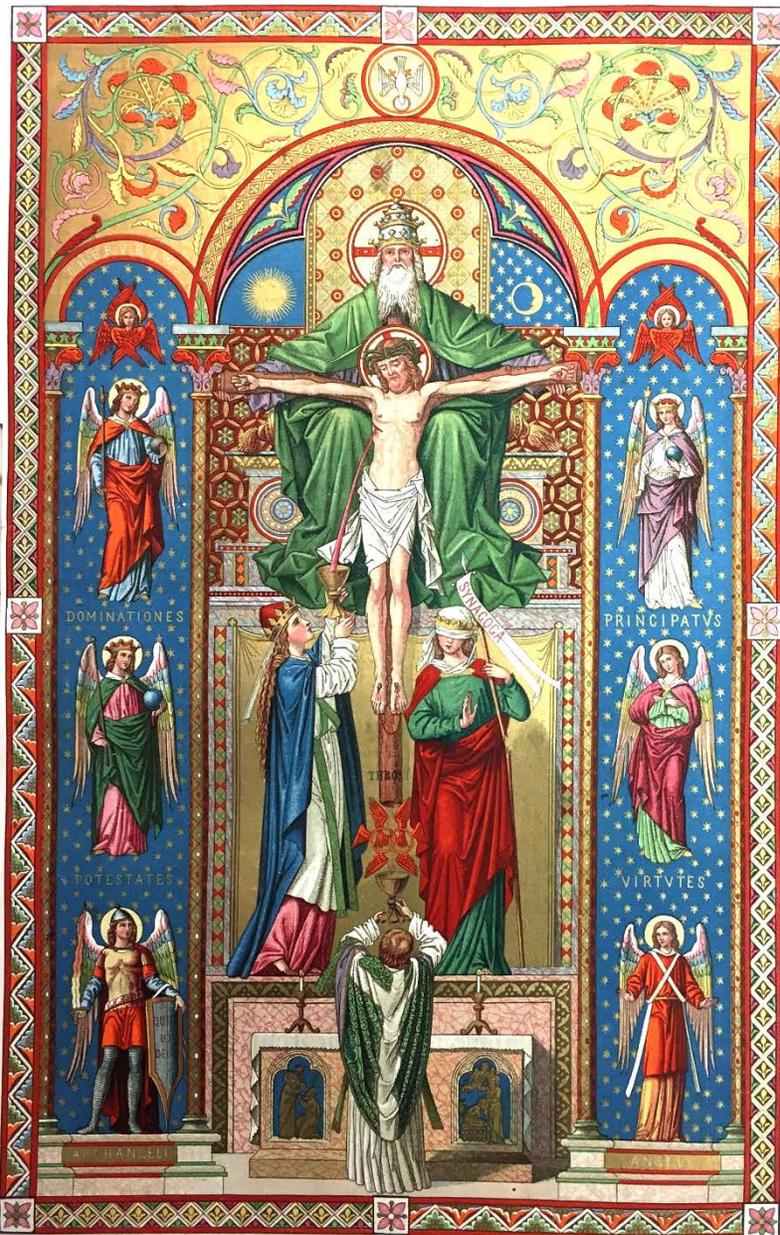


# Understanding the Mass

## Nine Bulletin Inserts

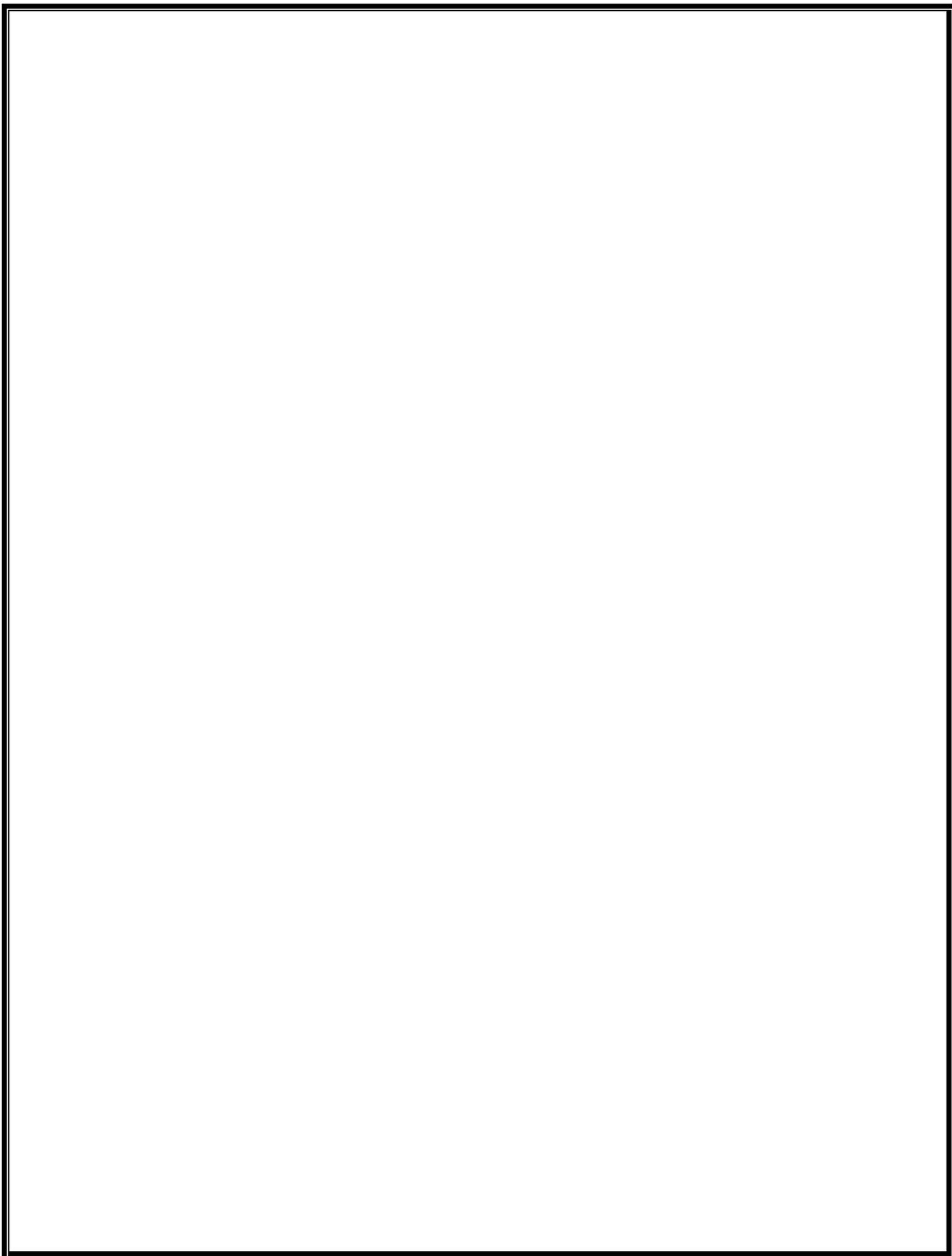
By

Deacon Tom Foye



HIC CALIX NOVUM TESTAMENTUM EST IN MEO SANGUINE.

1. Cor. 11, 25.



## Understanding the Mass

### Part 1: Jesus Loves You!

The goal of this series of brief reflections is to help us grow in our understanding of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Before we can talk about the Mass, we need to be aware of a few basic principles, then build on these to increase our knowledge of the Mass in addition to its purpose and goals. Like a house built on rock, these beginning articles will focus on basic principles forming a solid foundation upon which we will build our house of understanding. The first topic will be the Sacraments.

Jesus loves us. His love was evident when he died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. After his death but before his bodily ascension into Heaven, He wanted to leave behind a way for all of us to interact with Him, a way each of us could have a personal encounter with Him as the living, risen Lord. He did this by first creating the Church on earth as His Body, then entrusting to it the seven Sacraments which He instituted as the most powerful method of having our own personal encounter with Him. There are many ways of having a personal encounter with Jesus but the deepest personal encounters come only through the seven Sacraments.

The next article will delve a little deeper into the definition of a Sacrament and how Jesus is made present through them.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 2: Invisible Realities

The first article in this series referred to the seven Sacraments as the most powerful way of having a personal encounter with Jesus.

We all have experienced the Sacraments but few have a good understanding of them. While we know what each of the seven is named, do we know what makes them a Sacrament? What is the common thread that binds them together as sacraments? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, defines a sacrament as “an efficacious sign of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us through the work of the Holy Spirit.” (1210)

That is a great deal to digest! I find a definition by Karl Rahner, S.J. more helpful. He says sacraments are all, “visible signs that participate in invisible realities.” A personal encounter with Jesus is one of these invisible realities. We can only see these invisible realities with eyes of faith. As St. Paul says, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” (2Cor 5:7) This is one of the difficulties in understanding the sacraments. The realities they produce are invisible but we still participate in them. They do not simply indicate or point to other realities but allow us to actually be part of or take part in other invisible realities.

An example of an invisible reality that we all take part in is love for another person. We cannot see love but we can feel it and know that it exists beyond any doubt. Some invisible realities are feelings while others are events or places.

Examples of invisible realities within the Mass include the Last Supper, Jesus’ death on the cross, the Supper of the Lamb and the Mass in Heaven with the angels and saints. We participate in all of these invisible realities whenever we attend Mass, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

The remaining articles will discuss our participation in these realities as well as others.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 3: Greatest Prayer of the Church

All the Sacraments are “visible signs that participate in invisible realities.” They are all personal encounters with the risen, living Jesus Christ. All the Sacraments have this in common, but why does the Church refer to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, also known as the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as the greatest prayer of the Church?

It is the prayer of and by Jesus, “through Him, with Him and in Him.” At the Last Supper, Jesus told the apostles to “do this in memory of me.” But he was not only talking of that meal but of the sacrifice to follow. **The Mass is both a sacrifice and a meal.** It is important to understand that Mass is a prayer given to us by Jesus. He is also acting as the principle agent. The Mass is an action of the living, risen Christ. As such, it is not ours to change but was given to us by Christ. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says that nothing may be added or removed from the Mass, not even by a priest.

Through the Mass we join our sacrifices, bread, wine, joys and sufferings, to those of Christ’s and these are offered by Him to God the Father for the Father’s glorification and, in the process, we are made holy, or sanctified. We are also strengthened spiritually by being fed on the Word and Body of Christ and then sent out on mission to make our society a little more like Heaven in preparation for His second coming when we will be at home. Until then, we are a pilgrim people on a journey toward the banquet of the Lamb.

The Mass does all these things “through Him, with Him and in Him” and that is why it is the greatest prayer of the Church.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 4: The Real Presence

Out of His love for us, Jesus instituted the seven Sacraments so we could have a strong personal relationship with Him. He is present in all of them but **only in the Sacrament of the Holy Mass does His real presence abide or remain with us after the Sacrament has been completed.**

At every Mass, during the Eucharistic prayer as we kneel in solemn reverence, the bread and wine which are offered as symbols of our work and sacrifices are transubstantiated into the real Body and Blood of Jesus. He becomes present body, blood, soul and divinity by the work of the priest acting "*in persona Christi capitis*", in the person of Christ the head, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even though the priest is a key element, it is the action of the living risen Christ that makes this possible. We are then fed by the bread of life, Jesus' body, at the banquet of the Lamb (the invisible reality of life after the second coming of Christ) and are changed into what we eat. By this process, we become little Christs in order to bring the Gospel we just heard in the Liturgy of the Word out into the secular world and make it a little more like Heaven, preparing it for the second coming of Christ.

The continuing presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species of bread is what makes Eucharistic adoration meaningful and also what makes the Sacrament of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass stand out from all the other seven Sacraments. It is one of the reasons the Second Vatican Council called the Mass the "Source and Summit of our Christian life."

The next article will further discuss the reasons why Vatican II called the Holy Mass the "Source and Summit of our Christian life."

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 5: The Source and Summit

The Liturgy is the public work of God on behalf of His people. All Sacraments are liturgies but the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Mass, stands out as the ultimate expression of Christ's love.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was instituted by Him out of his love for us. He is the principle agent acting through the priest. In the Mass, He allows us, as Baptized Catholics, to join in the ultimate sacrifice of His death on the cross for the glorification of our Father and in the process we become holy. His suffering and death on the cross in addition to His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity are all made present through the power of the Holy Spirit.

No other Sacrament or prayer can do this. **No other Sacrament can produce the constant flow of grace which animates and gives power to our Christian lives.** That is why the Church calls the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Mass, the source of our Christian Life.

It is also the summit, the goal of our Christian life, the closest thing we have to Heaven here on Earth. The objective we must all work towards when we are not at a Mass is to make our society a little more like Heaven, to prepare the world for the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior.

As the mechanism through which Jesus produces a constant flow of grace, the Mass is the source or origin of our Christian life and as the ultimate goal of Heaven on Earth, it is the summit or fulfilment towards which all our Christian work is focused.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 6: Active Participation

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.” (SC14)

This famous quote is from the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and has been the driving force behind much of the reform that has occurred since the end of Vatican II. Despite being arguably the most famous quote from this document, it is also one of the most misunderstood. Many people think that active participation means only general activity such as standing, kneeling, sitting, singing, praying out loud and taking an active role such as being a Lector or Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. These are external modes of participation. One of my favorite quotes is by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger from his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, “if the liturgy degenerates into general activity, then we have radically misunderstood the “theodrama” of the liturgy and lapsed almost into parody.” We need to also consider our internal participation.

Fully, conscious and active participation means that we understand the Liturgy and completely take part in it with our entire being, our hearts and souls, in both the Holy Sacrifice and the Eucharistic banquet. We embrace Jesus Christ and join our sacrifices to His on the cross for the glorification of our Father. We attend Mass not for what we get but for what we can give, glorification. This happens not only through general activity, which is a part of it, but also through silent prayer and reflection. **Active participation occurs when we “lift our hearts up to the Lord.”**

Many times at Mass we can get distracted by the people around us or personal issues with which we are struggling. Jesus is divine but also human. He is aware of our distractions and will help us focus on the Liturgy if you ask for his assistance. Keep returning to him and your active participation will grow.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 7: The Mass as Sacrifice

Religion has existed since the early days of man. Its universal goal is the unification with God, although the reason for this goal varies. Pagan religions hoped achieving this unification would give them control over nature. Christians know that achieving unification will lead to our purification through the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with our loving creator. A common theme present in these religions is the hope to achieve unification through sacrifice.

The pagans used replacement sacrifice where valued possessions were sacrificed to the Gods as replacements for themselves. After the Passover, the Jews used the blood from sacrificed animals to attempt this unification. Jesus Christ made all these previous sacrifices obsolete by making the ultimate sacrifice of his own life to God the Father, on our behalf.

He also gave us the gift of the Mass where we can, in an un-bloody fashion, join our own sacrifices, our work, fears, hopes, and pain, to his death on the cross as He offers this sacrifice up to His Father for the Father's glorification and our sanctification, our being made holy, our sharing in the divine life of Christ, our sharing in His grace!

"The celebration of Holy Mass is as valuable as the death of Jesus on the cross." This is because we participate in the invisible reality of the one crucifixion of Christ at every Mass. We do not represent it, we do not memorialize or recall it, we do not repeat it, **we participate in the actual historical event** that took place over 2000 years ago which echoes through time and space by the divine power of Christ. This is why it is called the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the greatest prayer of the Church. It is both the prayer of Christ the head and the Church, His body. It is truly a prayer of the Mystical Body of Christ!

What an amazing privilege it is to be Catholic and be able to participate in this divine event.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 8: The Mass as a Banquet

“Many are invited, but few are chosen.” These are the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:14. He was telling the chief priests and elders a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven as a wedding banquet. There are also many passages in Sacred Scripture about the time after the second coming of Jesus which is referred to as the Banquet of the Lamb.

At every Mass, communion is also referred to as the wedding feast or a foretaste of the Banquet of the Lamb. **At this banquet, we have participated in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, have witnessed his coming as the bread and wine are turned into His Body and Blood and become one with him by consuming Him at Holy Communion.** However, unlike normal food that becomes part of us after we eat it, this food has a divine component that causes us to become part of it. We consume the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Christ, are nourished spiritually and become little Christs. We are united with Christ and strengthened to be able to go out into society carrying Christ in our hearts to make the Earth a little closer to Heaven in preparation for His second coming.

Mass reaches its high point with this banquet, but that is not the only place during the Mass where we are fed. During the Liturgy of the Word, especially during the proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus is present and we are fed and strengthened spiritually. In order for this to happen, we must listen to the words as they are proclaimed. We must allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. We must keep our minds and hearts open to the graces of God which flow to us through our hearing of His Word. As strange as it sounds, during the Liturgy of the Word we must consume the presence of Christ through our ears.

The Mass is truly a banquet for all of our senses. Our nourishment is in the form of grace but, like all the other Sacraments, in order for the maximum grace to be fruitfully received, we must be adequately prepared, free of distraction and participate fully, actively and consciously.

## Understanding the Mass

### Part 9: Heaven on Earth

As I mentioned way back in Part 2, Karl Rahner says sacraments are “visible signs that participate in invisible realities.” Throughout this series I have talked about many invisible realities that we encounter during the Mass; the forgiveness of sins, Jesus’ crucifixion, and the Banquet or Supper of the Lamb to name just a few. We participate in these invisible realities.

At Mass we are also surrounded by things that point to rather than participate in invisible realities. Things that point to invisible realities and remind us of God are sacred signs called sacramentals. They are all around us. In fact, almost everything in church is sacramental (pointing to God) including the music (angelic voices), the candles (light of Christ), the incense (our prayers rising to Heaven), the columns (people), the statues (specific people), the art work and even the building itself, organized into a nave where the people pray, signifying the Earth and the sanctuary where the altar (Jesus) is located, representing Heaven.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is filled with invisible realities in which we participate and we are surrounded by items and actions which point to these invisible realities. These pointers, the sacramentals, help make the sacrament more fruitful. They help us raise our hearts and minds up to God so that his merciful grace can fill us with his infinite love and we can help prepare the Earth for the day when He returns.

The Mass is not only the closest personal encounter we can have with the living risen Jesus but also the closest most of us can come right now to Heaven on Earth. **The Mass is truly Heaven on Earth!**

The depth to which we experience these invisible realities depends upon our individual eyes of faith. May your eyes and hearts be open to these invisible realities and the graces of the Holy Spirit as you grow in the love of God!



Diocese of Marquette

All of these Bulletin Inserts may be downloaded individually or as a group from  
<http://www.dioceseofmarquette.org/divineworship/understandingmass>