Prayer and Worship Practices

Teacher Background

Personal Prayer and Worship
Through private prayer, every person experiences God in a special way. Each person comes to know God privately by joining their faith with events in their daily life. Examples of private prayer and worship include prayer to the Holy Spirit, rituals, turning an area into a sacred space, reciting formal prayers such as the Lord’s Prayer, Scripture readings and reflections, meditation and contemplation.

The Sabbath
Each Sunday is a mini-celebration of the Paschal Mystery. From the time of the Resurrection itself, this day has been "the Lord's Day." Because a day has been traditionally measured from sundown to sundown, many Catholics begin their celebration of the Lord’s Day on Saturday evening. They gather in community, listen to God’s Word and participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through extra rest and time spent eating and relaxing together, they make Sunday truly a day of rest and family togetherness.

During the first several centuries of worship, Christians celebrated the Eucharist only on Sunday. Gradually, the Church discovered that the single annual celebration of Easter was not enough to express the mystery of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and so added a number of feasts, extending aspects of the Paschal Mystery. Now Fridays, especially during Lent, remind Christians of the passion and death of Jesus. Saturdays are dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God.

The Eucharist Today
In the twentieth century, a liturgical movement begun by theologians and accepted by church leaders led to some important reforms in the liturgy. Vatican II's key document the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) was the high point of the reform movement. It led to the renewal of all the sacraments. Important changes that we take for granted today include the following.

We celebrate the Mass in the vernacular language so we can understand more fully what the Mass means. The Liturgy of the Word has greater importance. Guidelines instruct the homilist to develop the homily based on the readings. The Sunday readings revolve around a three-year cycle. This emphasis has helped Catholics discover the Scriptures. The altar now faces the people. This invites a clearer understanding of what is going on at the Eucharist. It also symbolically opens the Mass to fuller participation by all those present.

Today's Mass includes the Prayer of the Faithful, which links the Eucharistic worship to the whole church, the world and suffering in the community. Active congregational participation is an important feature of the post-Vatican II liturgy. Before, we commonly spoke of "attending Mass." Today, we emphasise "celebrating the Eucharist." The Mass is not a private affair. It is public worship in which the community, led by the priest, join in thanking, praising and adoring God together.

The revised ritual allows communion in the hand and communion under both species. The laity assume many ministerial roles today, for example, as readers, Eucharistic ministers, choir members, greeters and gift bearers.

In summary, Vatican II wished to make the Eucharist a celebration of the entire community. Many of the reforms help us better understand the symbolism and meaning of the Mass. They also help us gather together as a worshipping community.