

Roman Catholic Site Visit Guide

Introduction

The main Catholic service, called Mass, is typically held on Sundays throughout the day (some Churches also have a Saturday Service, the only thing different being the day it is held on). It commonly last around one hour. The Mass serves to unite the whole body of Catholics and to participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist: that is eating of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. There are also two small books near every seat, one titled Today's Missal and the other being the music issue, which has the rubric for the Mass and all the songs in it. After you find the correct date, you may use the Missal to follow along.

Arrivals

Dress: There is no set attire, though usually semi-formal is encouraged.

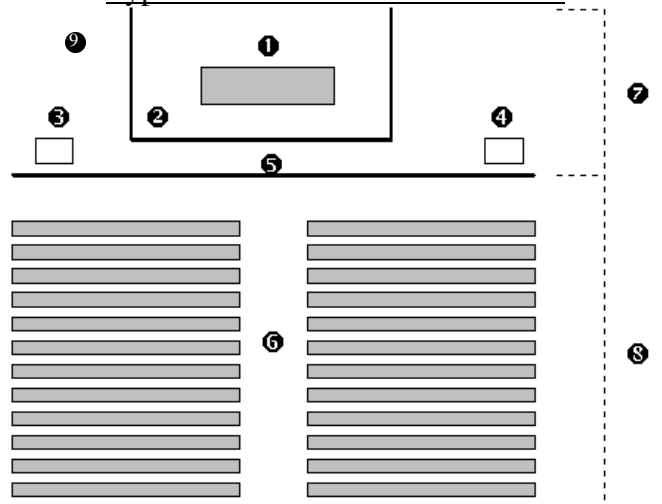
Time to arrive: one should arrive about 5-10 minutes before hand. Most churches have a Sunday and Saturday service, call ahead or look online for specific times.

Where/how to enter: Upon entering there will be a container of some sort (most commonly a "cup" built into the wall near the entrance) that has holy water in it. Most Catholics will dip their fingers into this and do the sign of the cross. When entering a pew many Catholics will genuflect (kneeling before the altar and doing the sign of the cross).

Architecture: Architecture varies from church to church depending on when and where the church was built and what the congregation want. All churches though have the following (all on the interior):

- Altar: where the Eucharist sacrifice is offered (bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ)
- Nave: location of the congregation, noticeable by pews (wooden rows for seating) or chairs. Faces the altar
- Cross/Crucifix: most churches have a cross or crucifix located behind the altar.
- Holy family: a statue of Joseph and one of Mary will flank the cross. One will be holding the baby Jesus.
- Stations of the Cross: there will be 12 works of art (varies as mosaics, small icons, etc.) that depict the 12 critical moments of the death and resurrection of Christ according to Catholic theology.

Typical Catholic Church Floor Plan



1. Communion table, most often called the altar.
2. Communion railing, also called the chancel railing.
3. Pulpit, used by clergy for gospel readings and sermons.
4. Lectern with Bible, used for scripture readings.
5. Boundary between nave and sanctuary; usually three steps up.
6. Pews, where the congregation sits.
7. Sanctuary or chancel.
8. The nave.
9. Crucifix, flanked by statues of the holy family.

What to expect during the service:

Before:

Most Catholics will pray. If there is a pew then there will be a knee rest (a cushioned pad that can be lowered and raised as needed) and if there are chairs then kneeling is usually ignored.

Structure of the Mass:

Entrance: the mass begins with the entrance of the Priest. The congregation stands and sings a gathering song. Once the song is done the Priest will stand near the altar and greet the congregation and then will officially start the mass with the Sign of the Cross which the congregation follows in. The Sign of the Cross is a way for Catholics to begin and conclude prayers by stating "In the name of the Father," touching forehead, "the Son," touching lower breast bone, "and the Holy Spirit" touching left and right shoulders. A few Catholics may go further and make a cross with their fingers and touch it, but this extra step not always done.

Penitential Rites: the Priest may lead the congregation in reciting the "Confietor," a prayer asking for forgiveness. The words will be in the Missal if it is read. The Priest will then lead the congregation in the "Kyrie" ("Christ Have Mercy, Lord Have Mercy, Christ Have Mercy" or similar, again in the missal) followed by the Priest reciting an opening prayer.

Liturgy of the Word: one of the more important parts of the Catholic Mass. Most of this part the congregation will spend sitting. There will be a first reading from the, followed by a recitation of a Psalm. Most likely this will be sung, and the congregation is encouraged to sing along, particularly during the refrain. Then there will be a second reading, which is followed by an "Alleluia." The congregation will stand during the song and remain standing during the following Gospel reading. When the Priest begins with "A reading from the Gospel according to..." followed by an "Alleluia."

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The congregation will stand during the song and remain standing during the following Gospel reading. When the Priest begins with “A reading from the Gospel according to...” Catholics will make a gesture: they will make a cross on their forehead, their lips, and then their heart, sometimes followed by the Sign of the Cross. This gesture symbolizes “May the Lord be in my thoughts, in my words, and in my heart.” It is not mandatory to do. After the recitation of the Gospel the congregation will sit as the Priest gives a homily that reflects what was read in the previous readings. A short period of silence will be observed: following this the congregation will stand and recite the Nicene Creed. The final part of this section of the Mass is called the “Prayers of the Faithful” where a list of intercessions will be read off: the response is “Lord, hear our Prayers.”

Offertory Rites: Some members of the congregation will then bring up gifts (bread and wine) to the altar. During this time a song is played, and a collection is taken (donations to the church).

Liturgy of the Eucharist: The Priest will make a series of prayers over the offering, which amounts to him asking God to make the gifts worthy and he worthy to bless them. The congregation then prays “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hand, for the Praise and Glory of His Name, for our good and the good of all His Church.” After this the congregation stands, the Priest will state additional prayers, and then state “with all the angels and the saints” which leads into a Chant or song that will be in the Today’s Missal. After this the congregation will kneel. The Priest will continue on with prayers, which he will conclude with a doxology of praise to God (can take a variety of forms) and the congregation will sing “Amen” (Amen is the only word sung in the previous tune). The congregation will stand, join hands and say the Our Father (for those familiar with it, Catholics end with “but deliver us from evil,” the last few lines being stated afterward the Priest interjects). Then the Priest will say “Let us share a sign of Christ’s Peace” at which time you just shake the hand of the people around you and say “Peace be with you.” This will conclude with a short song in the previous tune: the words are “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” The Priest and congregation will then state “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed.” A song will be played as the congregation is brought up, row by row, to receive the Eucharist or a blessing (*this part is optional*). After receiving one of these the congregation goes back to their seats and quietly prays/reflects on the event. Commonly there will be more than one song during this time.

Concluding Rites: The Priest and some key members of the congregation will give announcements during this time, followed by a final blessing by the Priest. The service will conclude with the Sign of the Cross and a final song; it is customary not to leave until the song is finished, letting the Priest leave first.

Participation & Observation Tips:

- Participation in most parts is entirely optional and most of the time encouraged. The Sign of the Cross is not mandatory, nor is genuflecting or any similar action. Signing is encouraged (even if you think you cannot sing) and most Catholics only sing during the refrain (most repeated part, the chorus of the song). Actions such as sitting/standing or offering “peace” to one another should be observed. Participation in the Eucharist is asked to be for Catholics and members of the Eastern Rite Churches only, though anyone can go and ask of a blessing from the Priest by folding their arms across their chest.
- Pay attention to what the Priest is saying (the Missal should have his words or something close in them) and notice how the congregation responds (through action and word) to get an idea of what it means to be Catholic. The Mass is meant to be a unifying event for Catholics and as such is a solemn and important event for them.

Afterwards:

At some churches there is a time after Mass to get to know members of the congregation, usually held in a nearby building or just outside. The Priest also will stand outside the Church to greet and talk with anyone attending; they are very approachable and willing to answer any questions. If you wish to stay and ask questions you are welcome.

Additional Resources

Catholic Pages.com, a tour of the new mass

<http://www.catholic-pages.com/mass/newmass.asp>

Wikipedia.com, Mass (liturgy), which details Roman Catholic Mass structure and Mass in other forms of Christianity

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_%28liturgy%29

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