

# History of the Research on the Mass

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My dearest ones,

Translated from the Italian  
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This time, just like a good grandmother, I would like to tell you something about the past, while taking you back briefly along the path of our work through the development of the materials of the Mass. The evolution of the material in our catechesis marks a gradual clarification of the themes that the children themselves have indicated to us to be essential in their relationship with God.

The Christological image of the Good Shepherd has always been, as you well know, the biblical core of our catechesis from its inception. Unfortunately, I cannot remember how this image emerged in our catechesis, nor what the reaction was of the children who indicated to us that it was central in their lives. I am not expanding on this theme here because there have been many opportunities to talk with you and to write about it (as recently as the 1988 Newsletter).

You are also aware how labored was the research to find a liturgical link to the parable of the Good Shepherd. The close union between the Bible and the liturgy (the Bible coming alive in the liturgy) has always been the foundation of our work. However, it has taken us 20 years for this union to be realized with regard to the parable of the Good Shepherd and the Eucharist. And it was so plain to see: the Eucharist is the time and the place when the Good Shepherd calls us to a special relationship and when we respond to Him in a special way. I think it took us so long to achieve this idea because it is so natural and essential. And the material which concretizes it (this idea) without adding to it, besides the little statue of the Good Shepherd - later removed - and the bread and wine, must be simple, almost poor I might say. Great things are simple; nevertheless, simplicity - true and essential - opens up horizons so limitless and profound that we feel almost lost when confronted with them. Unconsciously we create "complications" around simple and grand things. The child, on the other hand, does not do this; s/he seems to move in the most natural way into the greatest realities. This is why it is very educational for us, the adults, to live with the child.

During the 20 years required for us to come up with the Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd, some fundamental ideas about the Eucharist came to light. In July 1964, Michel Lanternier, founder and principal of the Rennes School in France, and my dear friend, paid me a visit. Together we attempted to select some key ideas linked to a gesture of the Mass which could illustrate the profound meaning of the celebration. Thus we focused on the moment of the offertory, accompanied by the words or phrases "Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ . . ." and the breaking of the bread.

The following November, I presented the gesture of the offering to the children for the first time, with excellent results. As soon as I performed the gesture slowly, in silence, I saw all the children become perfectly still. The silence deepened. My presentation took place in an atmosphere of intense concentration, and was prolonged as each child, in turn, repeated the gesture and the words.

Thus we had isolated the second moment of the Covenant, the response to God's gift. The first moment had not yet emerged. This was due, in part, to the fact that the Latin theology did not yet focus on the effect of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist. Therefore, the gesture of the epiclesis, the imposition of the hands accompanied by the words which explicitly say "Send your Spirit. . . ." were not yet emphasized. I do not remember when the gesture of epiclesis was presented to the children for the first time. However, sometime in the sixties we had focused on and presented the three gestures which clearly reveal the Mass to be the sacrament of the Covenant: the Epiclesis, which is the moment when we receive the gift of the Spirit, of the power of God -- that is the power of love -- that power which transforms the bread and wine into the presence of the Risen Christ, and the doxology at the end of the Eucharistic prayer. These two gestures stress the vertical dimension of the Covenant: everything comes from

God and everything returns to God. The third moment of the Covenant, which is its horizontal dimension, emerges from the gesture of peace and the breaking of the bread: we become united in the gesture which reveals the intimate relationship which comes from the one broken bread.

Was this the moment when we could state that we had arrived at the essence, or heart of the matter, concerning the Mass? No, we still felt an empty sensation. Something was still lacking that could transfer all these ideas, obviously very rich in meaning, from the mind to the heart. Something was lacking which could firmly anchor the Mass in the affections of the child, as well.

Finally this occurred in 1974 when, as we said earlier, we succeeded in linking the liturgy to the Bible, through the parable of the Good Shepherd. I won't spend too much time on this topic because we have spoken about it often and I wrote about it in the "Religious Potential of the child." (cf. Chapter on the Mass.)

Another element which has proved to be very important in introducing the littlest ones to the Eucharist is the mixing of a few drops of water into the wine during the preparation of the chalice. When did we begin to give it to the children? I don't remember, but what I do remember is that it was Massimo Lugli who made us understand its importance. It was 1962-63, or thereabouts; Massimo, who was 7 years old, kept coming back to this activity with a serious and concentrated attitude. Only towards the end of the cycle of meetings was he able to express its meaning clearly: there are only a few drops of water because we must "lose ourselves in Christ." It is best not to comment at such moments.

It is through this activity, which appears to be an exercise in control of movement, that the children become more aware of our participation in the offering of Christ to the Father. It is obvious to them that we are included in the offering: "We are in the drops of water" is a statement I have heard from the children many times. I should add that the mixing of the water and wine is a symbolic element found to be present even in the ancient tradition, as shown from research by Francesca Cocchini published in *Patristic Dictionary*, column 34.40, Marietti Publishers. As long ago as the second century AD, Irenaus writes about it and it recurs with the Hippolytus and Cyprian (third century AD); the latter says that the water mixed with wine is the people who join themselves to Christ (Epistle 63:13). Once again the children have guided us towards an idea that has demonstrated its importance in the church's tradition from the earliest times to the present.

The Cenacle, the narrative of the Last Supper, has been present in the Catechesis, I believe, from the beginning of our work, although I can't remember since when exactly. The words of Jesus focalized in "Take, eat . . . take, drink . . ." emphasize the total gift that Jesus makes of Himself, once more presenting the Mass as the "sacrament of the gift."

Keeping in mind the points I listed, it is incredible to see how all the essential theology of the Mass can be understood by children before they are six years old.

What we do with children older than six years is not a deepening, because the central nucleus is already given, but rather a broadening, an ordering of what was already given. But the most profound and fundamental idea was arrived at prior to the age of six.

In 1978, the "memorial" was born, a material which helps to visual the Mass as the actualization of the actions it is founded upon, namely, the Last Supper, death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit; this material develops that of the Cenacle.

What was still missing? An idea of the structure of the Mass was still lacking. We had isolated some points, certainly essential ones, but they were disjointed. This was fine for the little ones, but not for the middle group of

children older than six. So at a meeting with catechists on January 15, 1980, the "synthesis of the Mass," as we call it, came into being. In it the different individual moments, already known to the children, are organized and ordered in accordance with the sequence of the celebration.

Together with the catechists, we arranged on a large carpet all the materials we present to the little ones and there in front of us was the "synthesis of the Mass" we were seeking. It was necessary, however to reduce the size of the material so that it would fit into the box.

Gradually the work with older children (9-12) became clear. From the beginning we had worked with them on the materials of the Missal that goes back to Dr. Montessori's "The Open Book." Montessori suggested it for children older than 10 years. We have used it with younger children (8-9), but were not able to obtain individual independent work from the children. Obviously this was a sign that they were not oriented sufficiently to this work.

We had devised many different formats of the "guides" that are meant to help the children in preparing their missals. The good "guide" came about in 1981, 27 years after the beginning of this work. It is a material almost for adults, which leads one to the knowledge of the individual prayers which accompany and surround the essential moments of the mass. The material with which the children work at Via degli Orsini is still the same one that Rebekah wrote about during her Roman stay. The box with its drawers, where it is kept, is a gift from the Mexican carpenter, Jose Luis.

In 1983, the "Mystery of our Faith" was born. For a long time, I thought, "Is it possible that we are not able to prepare a catechesis (presentation) around the moment when we relive and express the essence of our faith, the synthesis of the Christian faith?"

This material is an outgrowth of the "Eucharistic Presence of the Good Shepherd," which we spoke about earlier. The presentation aims at helping the children think about the mode of the presence of the Good Shepherd NOW in celebration and how his presence SHALL BE among us at the completion of salvation history.

As you see, the path did not have a linear unfolding which would have been the case if it had been planned at a desk. We have worked, observed, met the needs of the children and become aware of the gaps in our presentations. Some attempts were too complicated, too intellectual, originating too much in our minds and did not adhere essentially to the reality of the Eucharist. The children were our exigent guides and inexorably "dropped" what was not strictly essential.

This story of our research has not been driven by nostalgic feelings for the purpose of keeping a record of our memories. I did it because I think there is an educational element in becoming aware of how slow, how attentive, alert and patient our research has been. It is important to be conscious of the fact that the results are good when one achieves a level of extreme simplicity and essentiality, even poverty, as I mentioned earlier. The results are good only when we find them before us as an unexpected gift, a "let down" when compared with the convoluted researches which have preceded it. So gradually we have reached the point you are acquainted with. Have we finished? I should say certainly not. One topic to be researched urgently with older children (9-12) and improved upon, is the link between history, as presented in the "Plan of God," and liturgy. We research, observe and look forward to a further gift.

Sofia