

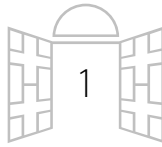
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# Beginning with the End in Mind

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## Thanks Be to God

I experienced one of those “aha” moments while attending Mass during vacation in a small town on the coast of Maine. The celebrant was an older priest with features right out of a Winslow Homer painting, as craggy as the coastline itself. His style was warm and inviting, and I instantly felt good being there. After communion, I marveled that no one in the congregation moved to leave early. As the priest looked us all in the eye and said, “The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” he reached down and scooped up an unsuspecting child no more than two years old and placed her on his left shoulder, making them look like an old holy card of St. Christopher and the child Jesus. My response of “Thanks be to God” was more than a happy exclamation celebrating the end of the liturgy. It was a personal clarion call for me to take what I had just learned from this wise old priest and share it with my own congregation and to become more like him as a celebrant, not

to do Mass in the same old way. The congregation was beaming along with me as the priest processed out with the child during the triumphant recessional hymn. After he returned the nonplussed child to her proud parents, everyone waited patiently to shake his hand. Lest I paint too idyllic a picture, it must be noted that one of the reasons no one left Mass early was that the usher had locked the parking lot gate and only now, after everyone had exited the church, did he unlock it so people could leave. (DJG)

**T**his simple recollection serves two purposes. One, it reminds us to retain our sense of humor when speaking about the Mass; it's easier to lift up our hearts when we are light-hearted! Second, and most important for our purposes in this book, it draws our attention to a part of the Mass that is easily overlooked: the very end. In fact, any discussion about the Mass—this sacred liturgy that calls the community of faith together week after week, month after month, year after year throughout a Catholic Christian's life—must begin with the very ending of the ceremony. Everything else that we do, say, pray—indeed, all the gestures, music, responses, and moments of silence—lead us to this exhortation to go out “to love and serve the Lord.” And because we are nurtured by the presence of our living God both in the words of Scripture and in the sacrament of the Eucharist, because we ask for and receive forgiveness in the penitential rite, because we are challenged by the insights presented in the homily, because we bring our needs and hopes to the altar to be offered up in sacrifice to our God, and because we reach

out in peace to one another in the community that has gathered, we are now given a mandate: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” Just what do these powerful words mean, and how do we go about accomplishing this directive?

“Go,” we are told. While we may remain for a while after Mass to share some hospitality, we are directed to leave. Our work here is done. We were not baptized in order to spend more time in church. Rather, the responsibilities that we agreed to take on as members of the church must continue in the world outside the church doors. It is the task of the laity in the congregation to take what just happened with them in order to reveal God’s presence in the world. That world is everywhere, including our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and workplaces. “Go” means leaving the safety and security of the sanctuary. It means internalizing the word of God and going forth to proclaim it, both in word and in deed, to others who may not be as receptive to hearing or experiencing it. “Go,” we are urged. It is the only way that Jesus Christ will reach those who have not joined us in worship and in prayer. Too many choose not to worship with us, so we must go to them instead of waiting for them to come to us.

But we are not simply dismissed haphazardly. We are told to “go *in peace*” (emphasis added). We are told to go with that which we have received and shared with our fellow Mass-goers: the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. What does it mean to “go in peace”? Well, obviously, we are not at peace if we are fighting. There is no peace if we are distracted. We cannot find the peace we are to leave with if we are angry, bitter, distrustful, or, worst of all, judgmental. The Mass calls us to begin by being at peace with ourselves. While we have our

faults and our sinfulness, the Mass invites us to place them all before our loving God who is only too happy to grant us peace. The Mass invites us to let go of our sins and the accompanying guilt so that we can be at peace.

Being at peace does not mean that we leave church worry free. Rather, we come to accept whatever doubts remain even after the celebration is over. We remember that there can be no real faith without doubt. “Peace” does not translate into the absence of all problems or into certainty about all matters. False certainty leads to arrogance, which often leads to our judgmental attitude toward anyone who does not agree with us. This, of course, does not lead to peace but to harm.

To “go in peace” means more than just being at peace with ourselves. The Mass sends us forth to “go in peace” with others, as well. By walking in peace we necessarily share that peace with others, for being at peace with ourselves makes it infinitely easier to be at peace with others. The word of God that is proclaimed to us at Mass challenges us to leave behind anything that separates us from one another: jealousy, bitterness, and prejudices. Even though we may enter the church building with these burdens, we are called to turn them over to the Lord and not pick them up as we leave. To “go in peace” means that we leave with a noticeable change in ourselves. Where the world attempts to drive wedges between us and our neighbors, the Mass sends us out to bring reconciliation to those whose lives are broken and chaotic. We are sent to live in peace with one another, as manifested in our words and responses, in our offers to help others, in all our actions, and where it cannot be seen—our attitudes and feelings, thoughts and desires.

When my daughter Amy was about five years old, she asked me, as we were leaving church one Sunday, “When can I get some peace?” My wife and I weren’t quite sure what she was talking about, so we asked her to explain what she meant. She said, “When you go up to the priest and he gives you peace . . . when can I get some, too?” She was referring to Holy Communion. Like all children at that age, they want to be a part of what the grown-ups are doing. She saw us going up to the priest to “get” something. To her, that something was “peace.” She heard the words, “The peace of the Lord be with you always,” and “Let us offer one another a sign of peace,” and “Grant us peace,” and, of course, “The Mass is ended. Go in peace.” She concluded that this “peace” that was being spoken of was what the priest or eucharistic minister gave us when we went up to receive communion. In essence, she was right. When we receive the body and blood of Jesus, we open our hearts to the real presence of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amy understood at a very young age what the words of a famous bumper sticker are trying to communicate: “No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.” (JSP)

The words “Go in peace” are not just nice words to nod our heads to because we agree with them in theory. To literally “go in peace” is an incredible challenge. As we reflect on what these words mean, we begin to realize just how transforming the Mass is supposed to be. We begin to see that, because of our baptism as Christians, we are called to be different. We are called to be holy—in the words of Peter’s epistle, a people

“set apart.” We begin to realize that to “go in peace” means much more than to leave with a good feeling. It means that we leave church with the intention of making peace happen in our personal lives and in what happens around us.

The Mass proclaims that we “go in peace to love and to serve the Lord.” We are not just humanists who feel compelled to be nice to our brothers and sisters only. The peace-making we do is in the name of the Lord. Our Lord is not some remote or punishing God, nor is he some pantheistic deity who is hiding in the bushes somewhere. Jesus Christ became flesh, lived among us, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and opens the gates of heaven for all of us. In the creed, we proudly proclaim our faith in a triune God—God who creates us, God who lived among us and redeems us, and God whom we experience in the depth of our being. This is the God we love and serve and take with us when we leave church. This is the God in whose name we are sent.

God’s very nature is relational, and so we find ourselves in relationship with God. That is why we are told to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. We all know that love is more than just words; it moves into actions. The Mass urges us to love God by acting against injustice, violence, war, prejudice—anything and everything that gets in the way of our loving one another. We must also do the small, everyday things that strengthen our relationships with those around us. And we are also responsible to act as part of the human family. On a global level our love calls us to fulfill responsibilities that we cannot ignore. We go forth to act as priests, making Jesus present to the world. We go forth to act as prophets, speaking on behalf of the oppressed and bringing hope to those in despair. We go forth to act as kings, serving

and protecting the vulnerable and providing for the needs of others. We go forth recognizing that Jesus is present not only in the bread and wine that we have just received but also in “the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1373).

And finally, we are told not only to love the Lord but also to “serve the Lord.” We cannot leave church with our own agenda, expecting to do things our own way. We serve our God and not ourselves. It must be God’s path we take, God’s words we speak, and God’s actions we perform. It must be God’s will that is done. After all, shortly before communion we prayed the words “thy will be done” in the Lord’s Prayer. We are sent forth, with God’s blessing, to do God’s bidding. Again, this is not an easy task, because to serve the Lord means to serve our neighbor. To serve the Lord is something that we do not in church but in our homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. To make matters more challenging, God’s will quite often runs counter to our human instincts, no matter how noble we might think them to be. God’s will can also be maddeningly mysterious. This is where faith comes in. It takes faith to serve the Lord. It takes great faith to respond in a way counter to what others expect, in a way that seemingly isolates us, making us look different or strange. In those times of painful loneliness we need to remember that we are not alone. The Mass strengthens our faith by bringing us into communion with Jesus and our brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ, whom we took into our hearts and souls in the Eucharist, walks with us. And all those with whom we shared a sign of Christ’s peace are fighting the same battle, struggling in the same way. The Mass helps us to overcome isolation and empowers us to recognize that so many others,

because of their faith, are in the fight with us. And, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Given all the above, when we are sent forth to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” our only response must be a resounding “Thanks be to God.” When we say these words, we are doing more than thanking God for what we have experienced in the past hour or so. Likewise, we are not thanking God that Mass is over, as relieved parents of a two-year-old who just made it through the liturgy with Cheerios, picture books, and a minimum of trips to the bathroom might be inclined to do. When we say, “Thanks be to God,” we are thanking God for the faith that brought us to the Mass and for all those with whom we have shared that faith: from the saints to our deceased loved ones, all of whom we have remembered in the Mass. For two thousand years, people of faith have gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. We continue to do so today, united with them all.

Most important, when we say, “Thanks be to God,” we are showing gratitude for the trust that God places in us to be Christ’s loving presence in the world. We call ourselves Christians. Christ lives and works in and through us, the people of God. We are happy to be called to the Lord’s Supper, which prepares us to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” When we say, “Thanks be to God,” we are thanking God profoundly and joyfully that the Mass is over and that we can leave church with renewed power to make God’s love and peace real in our individual circles of influence. It’s as if we are runners at the starting line after months of training, waiting for the race to finally begin. Everything has led up to this moment. Now we will give it our best effort. We’ll see what we can do, and we’ll be ready for whatever comes

our way. God has freed us from serving other “masters” that we have allowed into our lives. We are free to do what we were truly created to do: love and serve the Lord, our God.

With the end of the Mass in mind, we now go back to the beginning of the Mass and start as we, the community of faith, enter the church—be it a cathedral in Europe, a shed in some mission land, or our local parish—and begin the celebration of the Eucharist, our sacred liturgy.



*The world wants peace; the world needs peace. Peace is not a utopia, nor an inaccessible ideal, nor an unrealizable dream. Peace is possible. And because it is possible, peace is our duty: our grave duty, our supreme responsibility.*

John Paul II,  
Message to the United Nations Special Session,  
June 11, 1982

“Living the Mass is a rich and resonant meditation on the Eucharist that will deepen the liturgy for those on both sides of the altar.”

—**Andrew Greeley**

“We Catholics don’t go to Mass; we go back to Mass—from having been ‘sent forth’ the last time! Grassi and Paprocki explain why, how, and where in this important new book.”

—**Gregory F. A. Pierce, author of Spirituality at Work**

The concluding prayer of the Mass is a command: *Go in peace to love and serve the Lord*. We are charged to go forth and quite literally transform our families, our communities, and our world through the redeeming sacrifice of Christ as celebrated in the Mass. Fr. Dominic Grassi and Joe Paprocki use this challenge as the starting point for their inspiring and illuminating look at the central act of Catholic worship. They ask, *What would our faith look like if we truly understood the gift of the Eucharist?*

*Living the Mass* will stir a new passion for and a greater understanding of this sacred two-thousand-year-old celebration offered freely to all who come, to all who believe.



**FR. DOMINIC GRASSI** was ordained in 1973 and has been a pastor, an educator, a counselor, a coach, a retreat and vocation director, an inspirational speaker, and a writer. He is the author of the *Bumping into God* books and *Still Called by Name*.



**JOE PAPROCKI** has over twenty years of experience in pastoral ministry and is a well-known author and speaker on pastoral ministry and catechesis. He is the author of *God’s Library*.

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