

Who celebrates the liturgy?

“I like Father’s Mass.” Have you ever heard anyone say this, or have you said something similar yourself? I know that I have both heard it and said it. Whatever we associate with our Sunday Mass, whenever we reflect upon it, it is usually not without thinking of our priest. This, mind you, is not a bad thing, for the priest does play an essential role in the celebration of the Mass due to his sacred ordination. But is it correct to refer to the Mass as “*Father’s Mass*”? Although he is even referred to as the “celebrant,” is the priest the only—or even primary—celebrant of the Mass? Who celebrates the liturgy?

If we recall that the sacred liturgy, and particularly the Mass, celebrates the saving work of Jesus’ paschal mystery—his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension—then the first answer to our question is Jesus Christ. In other words, because the Mass presents the saving work of Christ, the principle celebrant of the Mass is Christ himself. And with Jesus—always and forever—are God the Father, who is the source and goal of the liturgy, and God the Holy Spirit, who shares in Christ’s saving mission (see *Constitution on the Liturgy*, n. 5) That the Holy Trinity is at work in the celebration of the Mass is apparent from the Mass’s prayers: beginning and ending the Mass in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; addressing prayers to the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit; praying the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, and *Creed*, all of which reflect the three persons of the Trinity.

In addition to the Father and Holy Spirit, Jesus also associates the Church with his saving work. As the *Constitution* says time and again, “Christ indeed always associates the Church with himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified” (n.7); “in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members” (*ibid.*); “every liturgical celebration...is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body which is the Church” (*ibid.*); “Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church” (n.26); “liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it” (*ibid.*); “every Mass has of itself a public and social nature” (n.27).

We shouldn’t think, however, that our Sunday morning celebration includes only Christ and those present within the walls of our church. While those physically present at that Mass participate in a unique way (see n.26), it is the entire communion of saints—“those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church” (CCC, n.962)—who are in some way present and celebrating. Again, the prayers of the Mass reflect this reality. We join our voices with those of the angels and saints singing *Holy, holy, holy*; we are in communion with and pray for the dead at the General Intercessions and during the Eucharistic Prayer; we pray for our pope, bishops, and clergy; and the priest prays the Eucharistic Prayer to God not only “for those here present,” but for “all your people.” Sacred music, art, and architecture ought also to convey this reality.

If what the Church teaches about the liturgy as a celebration of Christ and his Mystical Body is true, then we can conclude that the Sunday morning Mass is not the sole possession of any one person—even a priest—or parish or diocese. The Mass, wherever it is celebrated, is the common possession of all the baptized, living and dead, even though it takes place at a particular time and place. In fact, the reason that the Church places such emphasis on parish celebrations is because they “represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world” (n.42). Each of us is called upon to worship for the good of the entire Church and not simply for our own good or our family’s or parish’s good. Let us remember the universality—the catholicity—of our Church the next time we celebrate Christ’s Mass.

By Christopher J. Carstens