The Origins of the Mass

Virtually every word, gesture, and prayer in the Mass comes directly from Sacred Scripture or the earliest worship of the apostolic Church. None of it is a recent invention.

I

Introductory Rites

Sign of the Cross	*Matthew 28:19* Jesus commands the Apostles to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." CCC 233 · CCC 2157 · GIRM 50
Greeting *"The Lord be with you..."*	*Ruth 2:4; 2 Chronicles 15:2; 2 Timothy 4:22* Standard biblical greetings used by patriarchs, prophets, and St. Paul ("The Lord be with your spirit"). CE Dominus Vobiscum · GIRM 50
Penitential Act and Kyrie *"Lord, have mercy"*	*Psalm 51:1; Matthew 9:27; Luke 18:13* Echoes the tax collector's humble prayer in the Temple ("God, be merciful to me, a sinner!") and the blind men crying out for healing. CCC 2631 · CE Kyrie Eleison · GIRM 51 · GIRM 52
Gloria *"Glory to God in the highest..."*	*Luke 2:14* The song of the angels announced to the shepherds at Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Other verses were added very early, and the hymn goes back at least to the 3rd century. CE Gloria · GIRM 53
Collect *Opening Prayer*	*Ancient Church Tradition* Found in the first Roman sacramentaries (about the 6th century). One short prayer gathers ("collects") the petitions of the people. CE Collect · CE Liturgy of the Mass · GIRM 54

II

Liturgy of the Word

Old and New Testament Readings	*Synagogue Tradition; Acts 13:15* The early Christians continued the Jewish tradition of reading the Law and the Prophets on the Sabbath, adding the writings of the Apostles. CCC 1349 · CE Synagogue · GIRM 57
Responsorial Psalm	*Book of Psalms* The ancient hymnbook of Israel, prayed by Jesus and the early Church. CCC 2586 · CCC 2597 · GIRM 61
Gospel Acclamation *"Alleluia"*	*Revelation 19:1-6* From the Hebrew *Hallelu-Yah* ("Praise the Lord"), which forms the heavenly liturgy in the Book of Revelation. CE Alleluia · GIRM 62
Homily	*Luke 4:16-21; Acts 2:14* Modeled after Jesus explaining the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth and the Apostles preaching after the readings. CCC 1349 · GIRM 65
Profession of Faith *Creed*	*Councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD)* Formulated by these early Church councils to defend basic apostolic teaching. CE Nicene Creed · GIRM 67
Universal Prayer *Prayer of the Faithful*	*1 Timothy 2:1-2* St. Paul instructs that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people." CCC 1349 · GIRM 69

III

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Presentation of the Gifts and Offertory	*Genesis 14:18; Matthew 26:26* Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, and Jesus taking bread and wine at the Last Supper. CCC 1333 · CCC 1350 · CE Offertory · GIRM 73
Washing of Hands *Lavabo*	*Psalm 26:6* "I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O Lord." CE Lavabo · GIRM 76
Sanctus *"Holy, Holy, Holy"*	*Isaiah 6:3; Matthew 21:9* Combines the heavenly hymn heard by the prophet Isaiah with the crowd's cry on Palm Sunday ("Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"). CE Sanctus · GIRM 79
Eucharistic Prayer and Words of Institution	*Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25* Based on the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper when He instituted the Eucharist. The words are not exact: the four accounts differ a little, and the prayer draws on them with slight changes and additions. CCC 1339 · CE Canon of the Mass · GIRM 79
Mystery of Faith	*1 Corinthians 11:26* "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." CCC 1130
The Lord's Prayer *Our Father*	*Matthew 6:9-13* The prayer taught directly by Jesus to His disciples. CCC 2759 · CCC 2765 · GIRM 81
Sign of Peace	*John 14:27; Romans 16:16* Jesus promises His peace to the Apostles ("Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"), and St. Paul instructs the faithful to greet one another with a holy kiss. CE Kiss · CE Pax · GIRM 82
Agnus Dei *"Lamb of God"*	*John 1:29* John the Baptist's proclamation upon seeing Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" CE Agnus Dei · GIRM 83
Centurion's Prayer *"Lord, I am not worthy..."*	*Matthew 8:8* The Roman centurion's expression of faith when asking Jesus to heal his servant. CCC 1386 · GIRM 84
Holy Communion	*John 6:53-56; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17* Jesus' Eucharistic discourse ("Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life") and St. Paul's teaching on sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. CCC 1384 · CCC 1396 · GIRM 85

IV

Concluding Rites

Final Blessing	*Numbers 6:24-26; Luke 24:50* The Aaronitic blessing of the Old Covenant, fulfilled when Jesus raised His hands to bless the Apostles before His Ascension. GIRM 90
Dismissal *"Go forth, the Mass is ended"*	*Matthew 28:19-20* The Great Commission to go into the world and make disciples. The word *Mass* itself comes from the Latin dismissal formula *Ite, missa est*, "Go, it is the dismissal," the sending forth of the faithful. CCC 1332 · CCC 849 · CE Ite Missa Est · GIRM 90

How Old Is the Mass?

Writers outside the Bible describe this same worship from the first generations of the Church. In order of date:

Before 100 *The Didache*	"But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions." The commoner view places this teaching before the year 100. Didache 14 · CE Didache
By about 104 *St. Clement of Rome*	Quotes "Holy, holy, holy" from Isaiah and seems to say it is also sung in church, the earliest evidence for the Sanctus. 1 Clement 34 · CE Sanctus
98 to 117 *St. Ignatius of Antioch*	Bishop and martyr. Calls the Eucharist "the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ" and says it belongs to the bishop or the one he entrusts. Smyrnaeans 7-8 · CE St. Ignatius
About 155 *St. Justin Martyr*	Writes to the pagan emperor Antoninus Pius explaining Sunday worship: the Apostles and Prophets are read, the one presiding preaches, all stand and pray, they exchange the kiss, bread and wine mixed with water are brought, the thanksgiving is prayed, the people answer Amen, and all receive Communion. The Catechism says these basic lines "have stayed the same until our own day." CCC 1345 · First Apology 65-67
Before 258 *St. Cyprian of Carthage*	Quotes the priest's "Lift up your hearts" and the people's reply, "We lift them up unto the Lord," still said at every Mass. On the Lord's Prayer 31 · CE Preface
About 400 *De Sacramentis*	Attributed to St. Ambrose. Quotes prayers of the Roman Canon, including the account of the Last Supper. CE Canon of the Mass
590 to 604 *St. Gregory the Great*	Tradition credits him with the final revision of the Roman Canon. That prayer, essentially unchanged since the 7th century, is still in the Missal as Eucharistic Prayer I. CE Canon of the Mass · GIRM 219

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The Mass is woven almost entirely out of Sacred Scripture. To take part in it is to pray the Bible from beginning to end.

Deo gratias

Sources

Every citation is a link in the PDF. On paper, look it up by number or title.

Scripture New American Bible, bible.usccb.org, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Quotations above may differ slightly by translation, and some verse numbers differ (Psalm 51:1 is 51:3 there).

CCC Catechism of the Catholic Church, by paragraph, vatican.va/archive/ENG0015.

GIRM General Instruction of the Roman Missal, by paragraph, vatican.va.

CE The Catholic Encyclopedia (1907 to 1913), by article, newadvent.org/cathen. Its dates reflect scholarship of its time.

Church Fathers Ante-Nicene Fathers translations, newadvent.org/fathers.