Living from Mass to Mass as a Way of Ceaseless Prayer
Liturgical Conference, University of Notre Dame, June 20-22, 2011

(When I was a little girl, the Franciscan Sisters who taught in the Catholic grade school I attended in Jefferson, Wisconsin, explained to us that, because of the different time zones around the globe, a Holy Mass was being celebrated somewhere on earth every hour of the day. Spiritual communion was therefore always possible. A way of ceaseless Eucharistic prayer! I want to dedicate this talk, in thanksgiving, to the Sisters who taught me that lesson.)

A way of ceaseless prayer. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Saint Paul exhorts the Christians of that persecuted community to “pray without ceasing.” The earliest of the writings that make up the New Testament, the epistle provides “the oldest literary evidence of the significance attached to the death and resurrection of Jesus by the early Christians,”¹ who lived in the expectancy that Christ would return soon, but “like a thief in the night” (5:3), suddenly, in an hour impossible for them to know. The epistle witnesses to their belief that the same Christ who died and rose will come again to raise the dead and all those yet alive who have died in him through Baptism. Fragmentary creedal formulas (1:9-10, 4:14, 5:10) are interwoven throughout the letter, as Raymond F. Collins notes, bringing us close in contact with the gospel as it was preached “in the period between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the written works of the NT (i.e., AD 30-50).”² St. Paul encourages the disciples to live as people belonging “to the day” (5:8) as they await “the Day of the Lord” (5:2)

² Ibid.
In this eschatological, “world-ending” context, the exhortation to “pray without ceasing” sounds with a special urgency—like a wake-up call, perhaps, for people who have begun to doze during a night-long vigil or at a wake. The Gospel According to Saint Luke confirms this. Just as Paul tells the people of Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (5:18) and to “comfort one another” (4:18), Luke records in Chapter 18 Jesus’ parable “about the need to pray continually and never lose heart” (18:1). In that parable a widow knocks again and again at the door of the judge until he gives her “her just rights” (Lk. 18:5); so, too, Jesus explains, the Lord will see that justice is done in answer to “his chosen who cry out to him day and night,” if only the Son of Man, “when [he] comes, will . . . find . . . faith on the earth” (Lk. 18:7-8). Ephesians 6:18 similarly exhorts, “Pray all the time, asking for all you need.” In that letter, as in his first epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul calls upon his fellow Christians to “wake up from [their] sleep” (5:14) and to “go on singing and chanting to God in [their] hearts,” thanking him “always and everywhere” (5:20).

The call to constant prayer, then, is certain in the teaching of Jesus and in the life of the early Church, and it sounds most urgently in an eschatological context of vigilance for the Lord’s coming to judge the living and the dead. Many questions remains, however: what did Saint Paul really mean in practical terms when he said, “Pray without ceasing”? How have Christians understood this exhortation throughout the two millennia that have passed since the Incarnation of the Son of God changed human history forever? What does this exhortation to pray ceaselessly have to do with the Mass? What does it have to do with the Mass as it is celebrated—or not celebrated—by Christians today?
In a now-classic study by Dom Gregory Dix entitled *The Shape of the Liturgy*, first published in 1945, the famous Anglican scholar and monk outlined a history of the development of the Eucharistic rite that has come to underlie contemporary revision of the Eucharistic liturgy in virtually every denomination, including the Roman Catholic revisions set forward by Vatican Council II. In that book, Dix argues (among other things) that during the first three centuries of Christianity, the celebration of the Eucharist had a strongly eschatological, world-ending character. A memorial of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, the Eucharist offered the “food of martyrs” and the “bread of life” to Christians whose Baptismal commitment entailed a readiness to suffer and to die for the faith in the expectancy of a share in Christ’s resurrection. The Eucharist was celebrated in private homes or in hidden places, the Catacombs, often at or upon the tomb of a martyr, to signify that the faithful departed had died in and for Christ and awaited the “resurrection of the body” guaranteed at the Second Coming of Christ by Christ’s own Resurrection and Ascension. According to Dix, the personal prayer-life of Christians—what he calls the “life of edification”—was closely related to the Eucharist, because both the personal prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist took place “under much the same conditions,” in the midst of a pagan world, largely hostile to the faith.

In the fourth century, the Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine ended the centuries of persecution, initiated the period of the Church’s public worship, and effectively offered the Church the task to establish a “Christian civilization,” “of baptizing not the human material only but the whole spirit and organization of society.” When the celebration of the Eucharist became an act of “public” worship, it took on a

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4 Ibid., 315.
quality of “magnificence,” of world-affirming beauty, in accord with the Church’s new position at the heart of a society that it aimed to transform and to uplift. “The church of the fourth century did not hesitate to be magnificent,” writes Dom Gregory, “just because she did not refuse to be public.”

This trend coincided, however, with a new “world-ending” movement—the monastic movement, started by St. Anthony of Egypt and other desert fathers, which also spread to urban centers like Rome, where pious men and women established monasteries, some of them in their own homes. Vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience, these Christians voluntarily embraced a “change of life,” an ascetical *conversatio*, that meant a death to this world, a freely chosen martyrdom, and an eschatological anticipation of the heavenly world-to-come, especially through a discipline of constant prayer. Whereas Christians in the first three centuries had paused for personal prayer at set hours during the day (for example, morning, noon, and night), the zealous monks of the deserts—and there were thousands of these—aimed at continual prayer, especially through the daily recitation of all 150 psalms, with short pauses for personal prayers (silent and voiced) interspersed between each of the psalms, and with pauses for other necessary activities (sleeping, eating, etc.) kept to an absolute minimum.

Taken together, the “world-affirming” and the “world-ending” liturgical expressions of the Paschal mystery—for they are both that—affirm that the Son of God became human through his Incarnation in Mary’s womb, suffered death, and rose again that there might be “new heavens and a new earth,” a redeemed and a renewed creation in Christ. “It is this *double and mutual repercussion of time and eternity upon each other,*” writes Dom Gregory Dix, “in that act of God which is the redemption of the world by

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5 Ibid.
Jesus of Nazareth, that is the essence of Christian eschatology. And of this,” he adds, “the supreme expression from the beginning is the eucharist.”

The creative interplay between these “world-affirming” and “world-renouncing” movements in the life of the Church accounts, in Dom Gregory Dix’s analysis, for liturgical developments through the Middle Ages. The monastic movement, which greatly affected and inspired the public worship of the Church, protected the newly “secular,” more ceremonious celebration of the Eucharist from losing its eschatological, world-ending character. The monastic aspiration toward a life of continuous prayer, hour by hour, also offered Christians involved in work in the world a model for discovering analogous ways of constant prayer through the sanctification of time. The monastic emphasis on the Scriptures affected the liturgy of the word within the Mass in its public celebration, while the Eucharistic rite as such “finally remained the centre of monastic devotion.”

All of these interactions between what Dix calls “the puritan and ceremonious theories of worship” were possible, according to him, and produced “a most fruitful alliance in the same church,” because “both were alike catholic in doctrine.” The doctrinal split in the sixteenth century, he comes on to argue, divided the church in a complex way precisely along these two lines, leaving the Protestant churches, in particular, vulnerable either to a fundamentalist eschatology (evident, for example, in those sects that have embraced the idea of a Rapture) or to a secularism that too easily conforms to the dominant culture.

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6 Ibid., 747-748.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
And what about us Catholics? Writing as an Anglican in 1945, before Vatican Council II, Dix implies that the “ceremonial” theory of worship, so strongly emphasized in the Catholic Mass and in the Church’s sacramentalism, had come to be developed in a one-sided way that needed to be complemented by a renewed “Puritanism” in the liturgy of the Word and in the personal witness to Christ of the individual person, if the Church’s mission to consecrate the world to Christ, and to transform its culture was to be accomplished.

In the meantime, of course, the reforms of the second Vatican Council have taken effect. It is easy, in reading the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963, to see the influence of Dix’s historical reconstruction and of the much larger, international, liturgical movement that had preceded the Council. In Pope Paul’s preface to that Constitution, he speaks of the liturgy itself as revealing both “the mystery of Christ” and the “true nature of the Church” as a hypostatic union of things eternal and temporal:

It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek (cf. Heb. 13:14). Day by day the liturgy builds up those within the
Church into the Lord’s holy temple. . . . At the same time the liturgy marvelously fortifies the faithful in their capacity to preach Christ.  

The document famously calls the liturgy the “source” and “summit” of the Christian life, because it bestows and nourishes in this life the life of grace that is and will be eternal, anticipating in the here and now of earthly existence the “heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims.”

The document calls for a “restoration” of the ancient liturgy in its two parts, as described by Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy*, namely, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in such a way that they are “so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.” Striking is the emphasis placed upon the Scriptures and the homily: “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly. . . . The homily . . . is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy.”

Everywhere, the “public” nature of the liturgy is emphasized by the Council Fathers, who call for the “devout and active participation by the faithful.” Not “silent spectators,” the faithful present at Mass “should participate knowingly, devoutly, and actively” in the “rites and prayers.” It is the duty of pastors “to ensure that the faithful take part [in the Eucharistic celebration] knowingly, actively, and fruitfully,” because “the sacred liturgy” can only produce “its full effect” if “the faithful come to it with

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10 Ibid., 142, 141.
11 Ibid., 156-157.
12 Ibid., 155.
13 Ibid., 155.
14 Ibid., 154.
proper dispositions,” ready to “cooperate with divine grace,” their thoughts matching their words.\textsuperscript{15}

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, however, has relatively little to say about how those “proper dispositions” for public worship are to be formed. It mentions, briefly, in this connection the life of private prayer: “The Christian is assuredly call to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father in secret (cf. Mt. 6:6); indeed, according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, he should pray without ceasing (cf. 1 Thess. 5:17).”\textsuperscript{16} The practice of ceaseless prayer, in short, bridges the gap between the public and the private and ensures that the faithful have the “proper dispositions” for Eucharistic celebration. But how?

Vatican Council II famously and importantly proclaimed a “universal call to holiness,” extended to the laity and well as to priests and religious, in Chapter 5 of \textit{Lumen Gentium}, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Among the means to this holiness—defined as conformity in Christ to the will of God, who “is love” (1 Jn. 4:16)—\textit{Lumen Gentium} refers to the liturgy, prayer, and good works: “Each must share frequently in the sacraments, the Eucharist especially, and in liturgical rites. Each must apply himself constantly to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service, and the exercise of all the virtues. For charity, as the bond of perfection and the fulfillment of the law (cf. Col. 3:14; Rom. 13:10), rules over all the means of attaining holiness, gives life to them, and makes them work.”\textsuperscript{17}

This passage, just quoted, does not draw any direct connection between the liturgical participation, on the one hand, and the listed personal works of prayer and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church}, in \textit{Documents of Vatican Council II}, 70-71.
service, on the other, except to say that charity unites them all. The document, moreover, affirms the laity’s call to holiness without pointing to the corresponding new “schools of holiness” in which the laity are to receive spiritual formation appropriate to their specific calling in the world—“schools of holiness” comparable to the religious rules and communal practices of the traditional religious orders. In what follows, I want to argue that the Mass itself can and should be such a “school of holiness.” Supporting that claim will require us to think about living from Mass to Mass as a way of ceaseless prayer, about how the “public”/”private” modalities in the life of prayer are interrelated from the Eucharistic liturgy as “source” to the Eucharistic liturgy as “summit.”

Much is at stake here. As my former colleague at Purdue University, Jim Davidson, a well-known Catholic sociologist of religion, reports in a recent study (“American Catholics and American Catholicism: An Inventory of Facts, Trends, and Influences”), weekly participation in Sunday Mass has declined drastically since the 1950s, when 75% of U.S. Catholics attended Mass weekly. Today only about 35% do so, and the statistics across generations paint an even bleaker picture, with the younger generations less likely than the older ones to fulfill their Sunday obligation. The “proper dispositions” are so lacking, it seems, that many Catholics not only do not participate fully in Mass; they do not participate at all.

In their 2005 book, Living the Mass (to which I will return), Fr. Dominic Grassi and Joe Paprocki list a number of reasons that have been proposed for this decline. Some say that the change in the liturgy from Latin to the vernacular is the cause of the trouble. Others explain that the liturgical changes were instituted at the parish level with insufficient explanation. Others refer to demographics—the movement of Catholics out
of the ethnic, Catholics ghettos that had provided homes for a predominantly immigrant population in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, into the pluralist, American mainstream and its capitalist values. The answer chiefly favored by Grassi and Paprocki, however, is a theological one: the supposed shift in people’s piety from a vision of God as “judgmental” to one of him as unwilling, or as simply unconcerned enough, to punish anyone for missing Sunday Mass: “As many Catholics discovered that they were not struck by lightning when they missed Mass, attendance deterioriated.”

The sentence I have just quoted suggests another reason not mentioned by Grassi and Paprocki, but which has been stressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his many writings about secularism. The ancient Greeks, who knew nothing of the laws of electricity, attributed the thunderbolt to the god Zeus. The image used by Grassi and Paprocki of being struck by lightning calls up the question of causality in the natural order and evokes the modern contest between the explanatory powers of religion and science. In that contest, faith itself—more than any particular image of God—is challenged.

In a haunting passage on the last page of The Shape of the Liturgy, Dom Gregory Dix affirms this threat. Writing in England in the midst of the Blitzkrieg of World War II, Dix refers to “the pagan dream of human power [that] has turned once more into a nightmare oppressing men’s outward lives. That will pass,” he opines, “because it is too violent a disorder to be endured. But elsewhere and less vulgarly, as a mystique of technical and scientific mastery of man’s environment, it is swiftly replacing the old materialism as the prevalent anti-christianity of the twentieth century. In this subtler

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form it will more secretly but even more terribly oppress the human spirit.”19 In the world that absents itself from participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, Dix suggests, people test out their “dream of the self-sufficiency of human power”—a dream as old as Adam and Eve, who wanted to be “like gods” (Gen. 3:5); by contrast, Dix proposes, “in the eucharist we Christians concentrate our motive and act out our theory of human living.”20

According to that “theory” (a word Dix chooses fittingly as an expression of tested faith), humans resemble God not as his rivals, but as “His creatures, fallen and redeemed.”21 We have been predestined in Christ for good works, for spiritual fruitfulness, and salvation, “but our obedience and our salvation are not of ourselves, even while we are mysteriously free to disobey and damn ourselves. We are dependent on Him even for our own dependence. We are accepted sons [and daughters] in the Son, by the real sacrifice and acceptance of His Body and Blood.”22

When atomic bombs fell on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August, 1945, the year of the publication of The Shape of the Liturgy, the Catholic painter Salvador Dali was inspired by the terrible destruction wrought through nuclear fission to consider the Eucharist as the unparalleled source of positive energy—the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ having the power to effect “a creative explosion of energy and beauty into the world,”23 transfiguring the lives of its recipients in communion and, through them, altering the course of history. His most famous Eucharistic painting, The Sacrament of the Last Supper (1955), links the four traditional

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19 Dix, Shape of the Liturgy, 752.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
qualities of the resurrected body of Jesus—*subtilitas* (the ability to walk through walls), *agilitas* (the ability suddenly to appear and to disappear at multiple locations), *claritas* (the ability to radiate light, as in the transfiguration), and *impassibilitas* (the final freedom from suffering and death)—to the Body of Christ received in the Eucharist.

For the early Christian martyrs, as Dix instructs us, the reception of the Eucharist, the “food of martyrs,” was an expression of, and a sacramental means of grace for, their readiness to live out their Baptismal commitment to the utmost in the midst of a hostile world—to die in, with, and for Christ, in order to rise with Him. His glorified body, received in the Host, gave them the power to lay down their lives for Christ, in order to take them up again in Him, in the age to come. Perhaps it is easiest, in a way, for a martyr—then and now—to live the Mass as a form of ceaseless prayer. Facing death, the martyr knows that time is short, that every minute counts, that there will be no time left in eternity, when the Bridegroom has come, like a good “thief in the night,” to take him or her to Himself. Facing death in and for the faith, the martyr’s life is drawn deeply into the Pascal mystery at the heart of the Mass. To offer one’s very life is the greatest possible participation in the offertory, consecration, and communion of the Eucharistic celebration.

In their practical little book, *Living the Mass*, Grassi and Paprocki argue that a proper liturgical participation in the Mass itself depends upon one’s prior response to the commission at the closing of every Mass. If one has taken seriously one’s commission to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord” and has tried to do what the Lord has commanded, witnessing to Him in the world, giving His gift of peace to others, then one can return to the altar of the Lord, again and again, with a heartfelt acknowledgement of
one’s sinfulness and weakness, with a hunger to be guided and instructed by the Word, with an offering of thanksgiving, a gift of joyful service and suffering to be transformed and rendered fruitful through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the words of consecration. If one has lived out of one’s Holy Communion during the week, then one can easily return to be with the community at the next rite of gathering. The form of the Mass, in short, determines the form of one’s life during the week, from Sunday to Sunday, or from Mass to Mass.

Grassi and Paprocki’s little book gives a popular expression to what Dom Gregory Dix, more learnedly, in the final chapter of *The Shape of the Liturgy*. “Every rite which goes back beyond the sixteenth century,” he observes, “is to a large extent the product not so much of deliberate composition as of the continual doing of the Eucharistic action by many generations in the midst of the varying pressures of history. . . and human life as it is lived.”

Moved by this traditional continuity and by the constant interaction between the Eucharistic liturgy and life, Dix concludes, “It is not strange that the eucharist should have this power of laying hold of human life, of grasping it not only in the abstract but in the particular concrete realities of it, of reaching to anything in it, great impersonal things that rock whole nations and little tender human things of one man’s or one woman’s living and dying—laying hold of them and translating them into something beyond time. This was its new meaning from the beginning.”

Like Dix, Grassi and Paprocki emphasize the practical “doing of the Eucharistic action” in everyday life. “When we hear the words, ‘Do this in memory of me’ in Mass,

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25 Ibid., 746.
we are being reminded,” they write, “that, in baptism, we made a promise to do certain things as followers of Jesus.” As sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Eucharist are meant to start us off on a way of life that requires practice, even as an apprentice is trained through constant practice. Thus the words at the end of every Mass: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Grassi and Paprocki’s book is structured in short chapters according to the parts of the Mass: the penitential rite, the scripture readings, the homily, the profession of faith, the prayer of the faithful, the preparation of the gifts, the Eucharistic prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, the rite of peace, Holy Communion, and the dismissal rite. Each chapter meditates on a single part of the Mass, provides an illustrative anecdote or two from real-life experience, and concludes with a list of seven or eight suggested practices. To practice the entrance rite of the Mass, they suggest, for example, (1) “Take time on a daily basis to prayerfully gather ourselves. . . . (2) Extend hospitality to those we encounter at work, on the street, and in our homes and communities,” etc.

Like lists in many books of this kind, Grassi and Paprocki’s “to do” lists can sound dry and, when taken all together, overwhelming. But that impression is a misleading one that misunderstands the authors’ intentions. Their suggestions are meant as prompts—a kind of brainstorming—to help each one to formulate his or her own concrete resolution. I can easily imagine a small group of people meeting together over the course of a year to give themselves a kind of extended retreat, following the outline of this book. The book is short, but it is not meant to be read all at once. Instead, a proper reading of it requires one to go slow, to take up each part of the Mass with reverent

attention, to think about its meaning and its implications for one’s own life, and to choose
a resolution, phrased in one’s own words, to practice.

The book is also adaptable (although Grassi and Paprocki do not themselves
highlight this feature). Depending on one’s present state, one might choose to focus on
one part of the Mass, instead of another. Someone who’s struggling with guilt and
remorse, for example, might want to live the penitential rite constantly for a while, as
people do who pray the “Jesus Prayer”—“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner”
repeatedly, until it becomes “second nature” to them and a cause of joy. The Jesus
Prayer, like many traditional prayers, can be understood as a personal translation or
application of the liturgical rite. The penitential part of the Mass is, of course, also
especially suited to personal practice during the penitential season of Lent.

If I were to offer a criticism of Grassi and Paprocki’s book, it is, first of all, that
they do not explain well enough how to use it, how to make its message personal.
Second, the book is good in breaking down the individual parts of the Mass, but it does
not suggest how they are to form a single organic whole, a single act of worship, in the
life of someone who wants to live the Mass as a way of ceaseless prayer.

If I myself were to write a practical book about the art of living the Mass, I would
encourage every person to choose a symbol from among those used in the Mass in accord
with their specific personality and mission in life—a symbol that has a mysterious appeal
for them as a symbol of themselves. A friend of mine, who is often tempted to feel like
an outsider, has chosen the church door as a symbol for herself, in accord with her desire
to welcome others and to be welcomed. She connects this image to the Scriptural image
of the gate and to Jesus’s word as the Good Shepherd: “I am the gate” (Jn. 10: 7-10).
Given this personal ideal of hers, it is clear that the rites of entrance and of dismissal are especially meaningful to her, but other parts of the Mass can also be suddenly illumined by this symbol—the Scripture reading, the homily, the opening of the tabernacle door.

Another friend of mine has chosen the cross, another the chalice, another the flowers on the altar, another the lit candles. If resolutions for living the Mass are chosen in accord with one’s own personal ideal and symbol, they will be more deeply and faithfully kept and offered. Through the array of symbols, too, the community learns of the beauty of its many members and of their mutual dependence, each upon the other.

I hope I’ve given you, in the end, some stimulation for thought about why and how the Mass is indeed given to us as a way of constant prayer. Dom Gregory Dix, as Robert Taft has written, probably overstated things when he set the Divine Office next to the Eucharist as two different “departments” of the liturgy, with complementary “world-affirming” and “world-ending” functions. It might be better, in the end, to see the Office—the continuous praying of the Psalter—as a way of living the Paschal Mystery at the heart of the Mass, of preparing through the scriptural Word for the Eucharist, where time and eternity meet. But I leave that debate for consideration at another time. In the meantime, for all time, let us “pray the Mass without ceasing.”