TEACHING MASS

Over the next five weekends I will be doing a bit of teaching about the parts of the Mass at the Masses where I am scheduled to preside. This was something I did with the children during a religious education Mass last Fall and since it was so well received it was suggested that I do a ‘teaching Mass’ for the whole parish. The purpose of this teaching of the parts of the Mass is being presented as a way to help understand better what we are doing in this rather formal and complicated prayer that is the Mass.
Fr. Richard

# 1 THE OPENING RITES

The Opening Procession: We have a procession at the beginning of our Masses to remind us that we as God’s people are a pilgrim people. We are journeying to our destiny which is eternal life, fullness of life with our God. The beginning of our journey began at our baptism. The procession that begins in this church at our baptistery reminds us of where we began our lives of faith and where we are going, directed by faith, in our lives. A festive part of any procession is special music and our music is usually in praise and worship of God as we gather.

In this opening procession it is the cross of Jesus that leads us, along with the Book of the Gospels that contains the words of Jesus to teach us. Although the whole congregation could be in the procession, it is the servers and lectors who represent all of us and the deacon and priest who are designated by the Church by their ordinations to lead this group of believers in procession that is stopping along the way of their journeys to be nourished. The priest and deacon are clothed in Roman vestments tying this gathering of Christians way back to the early days of the Church. The servers wear white albs the appropriate vesture of any baptized member of the church. In a way the congregation’s procession begins as believers leave their homes dressed in their own white albs or special clothing and enter the parking lot and then enter the church and process to their pew.

We gather in a space especially set aside for believers to get fuel or nourishment needed for the continuation of their journeys in life; to be refreshed in spirit, and to get further direction for their lives of faith; (In a secular sense our stop here every week is like any good rest stop!) Those who gather in this space have their attention focused on an altar and table that are one. The altar table is both a place of sacrifice and of meal. It is from this table (represented by the wood on our altar) that we will be in the upper room with Jesus at the last supper when he gives us the Eucharist. It is from this altar (represented by the marble top) that the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is offered and it is from here that we remember Jesus stays with us in this special Sacrament of the Eucharist to regularly nourish us. The altar is bowed to by all in the procession since it has been consecrated with the sacred chrism when this church was dedicated. It represents Christ in the community that gathers. The priest and the deacon kiss the altar since it reminds us that Jesus stays with us and that we his ordained ministers love him for that. It is from the altar table that he loves and kisses us. It is the altar table that we all bow to when we enter this holy place.
Opening Sign of the Cross and Greeting: This is a formal beginning pause to re-focus who we are. We are followers of Jesus, the Son of God, our Father, and alive in the Holy Spirit. All respond with AMEN, an ancient Aramaic word meaning ‘so be it’. We mark our bodies with this powerful sign that was first given to us at our baptisms when we began our faith journeys to fullness of life with God. We are greeted by the priest in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ in whose name we have gathered. The Lord be with you! And all respond, “And with your spirit.”

The Penitential Rite: Then the priest invites all gathered to do a bit of a tidying up of ourselves. A bit of a cleaning up for a special event. We prepare our hearts by taking a moment or two to recognize the sin and weakness that we are experiencing on our journeys in life. By an act of contrition, ‘I confess to Almighty God…’ or by a litany of forgiveness, ‘Lord, mercy’, we ‘prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.’ The priest concludes this preparation time with a common prayer of absolution.

The Glory to God: Now prepared in mind and heart to praise and worship God our voices are raised in an ancient hymn of praise to God, the Glory to God. This hymn that dates to the third century begins with the words the angels sang to the shepherds when Jesus was born, ‘Glory to God, and on earth peace to people of good will.’ It is a hymn of praise in thanksgiving to God for Jesus Christ.

Opening Prayer: Now gathered, the priest leading prays a prayer called the Collect or Opening Prayer. It is to be offered after some moments of silence while people are praying silently and becomes a collective act of prayer on behalf of all who are gathered. The prayer is addressed to God, our Father, in union with Jesus, his Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. To which all who have gathered respond: AMEN.

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In [the] opening procession it is the cross of Jesus that leads us...

The olive wood Jerusalem Cross pictured above was first used during the Lenten and Easter seasons at St. John Vianney Parish, 2019.
#2  THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

After God’s people have processed, gathered under the sign of the cross, prepared their hearts and have invoked God in prayer those gathered are seated to hear and to respond to the Word of God. Our attention is directed now to the ambo, a Greek word meaning a reading desk. Our ambo compliments the altar made of wood and stone that becomes a reading table and it is from here that we are fed and nourished with the word of God for the continuation of our journeys in life; here that we are refreshed in spirit, and from this word to get further direction for living our lives of faith. The readings are proclaimed from a book called the Lectionary and the Book of the Gospels which contain the stories and words of Jesus Christ. This part of the Mass is called the ‘Liturgy of the Word.’

The word ‘liturgy’ is derived from a Greek word we can translate to mean ‘a work that people do.’ The ‘work’ involved in this liturgy of the word by those who have gathered, is the work of listening, learning, and responding. The word of God spoken comes from the Bible (a word meaning ‘many books’) and for people of faith it is believed to be a living word.

The words heard are first ‘proclaimed’ by designated lectors and ordained ministers to the assembly that has gathered. The 73 books of the Bible (46 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament) are couched in history and developed in time. A list, or canon, of the books was compiled by the 4th century after Christ. As these words are proclaimed in the Mass they are to be understood as the living and inspired word of God for people of faith today and are to have application for us in our lives today. In three years of Sunday readings at Mass and in the daily Mass readings every two years, nearly all of the Bible is proclaimed for those who gather to listen, learn, and respond.

**The First Reading:** The first reading that is proclaimed is ordinarily from one of the 46 books of the Old Testament. This part of the Bible is sometimes called the Hebrew Scriptures (writings). It tells the story of God desiring to be with his people and the people’s response. The Old Testament story is told in the stained glass windows on the East wall of our church: (1) The story of creation, (2) the story of the flood, (3) the story of the commandments (first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet) and idolatry (the golden calf), (4) the stories of God’s deliverance of his people (the Menorah), the words of prophets (the scroll and the pointer [yad]), and worship (the ephod [the rectangular breast plate vestment of the temple priests]), and (5) the universal message of Peace (Shalom) that is God’s promise to his people.

This desire of God to remain with his people and his people to remain with God is called a covenant. It is like an agreement. The Ten Commandments summarize this covenant relationship of God desiring to be with his people and of his people’s in agreeing to follow his commandments. The worship in the temple and its altar also displayed this covenant relationship with God where God was recognized as
providing for his people and the peoples’ response of agreeing to offer first fruits of bulls, birds, lambs and grains to God. The first reading of every Mass relates the stories and events of the faithfulness, or unfaithfulness, of God’s people to the covenant he made with them and of their response to that covenant. Sometimes the readings from the Old Testament may seem, a bit obscure, but almost always a theme in them is found in the Gospel that is later to be proclaimed. At the conclusion of the reading, the lector says, ‘The Word of the Lord’ and the congregation responds ‘Thanks be to God.’

The Responsorial Psalm: After a few moments of silence are observed to absorb and reflect on the proclamation just heard, one, or part of one of the 150 psalms is sung. Using ancient chant or more contemporary compositions these lyrics of prayer help us focus on God’s care for us. These songs come down to us from Hebrew poetry and are often attributed to King David. The Book of Psalms is sometimes called the Prayer Book of the Church.

The Second Reading: The lector then proclaims a reading from the New Testament. This reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, the Book of Revelation, or one of the many letters penned by St. Paul, St. James, St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude or the Christian communities that formed around them. The 2nd reading emphasizes how Jesus Christ fulfills God’s desire to stay with us and to bring us to fullness of life through his life, ministry, death and resurrection. The reading also offers encouragement to live our lives in that newness of life offered to us in Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of the reading, the lector says, ‘The Word of the Lord’ and the congregation responds ‘Thanks be to God.’

The Gospel Acclamation: The Alleluia acclamation in the Mass is a way for all who gather to be engaged in a joyful expression of their faith. An acclamation is like a cheer. It engages those who are participating in the action. The ancient Hebrew word ‘Alleluia’ (meaning praise God) is on our lips as we prepare to hear the very words of Jesus that are to be proclaimed from one of the four gospels. The congregation stands out of respect for this most important part of the Liturgy of the Word.

The Proclamation of the Gospel: As the priest or deacon announces ‘A reading from the Holy Gospel …’ listeners are encouraged to mark their foreheads, lips and heart with a cross praying that the words of Jesus be renewed in our minds, be fresh on the words that come from our lips and form our hearts in deeper ways of love. And the congregation responds:  

Glory to you, O Lord.

The priest or deacon then proclaims a section from one of the four gospels. There are three year cycles for the Sunday Gospels. In our present year we are reading mostly from the Gospel of St. Luke. Since the Gospel of St. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, sections from St. John’s Gospel are also proclaimed in that year. At the conclusion of the Gospel the congregation says: 
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

The Homily: The priest or deacon then delivers what is called a homily. This presentation is normally based on the Scriptures that have just been proclaimed and seeks to have those listening to apply and connect the word of God to their lives. Some moments of silence following the homily allow the word of God to be reflected on by the congregation. This is different than a sermon which was a way of preaching based on various topics that was often employed prior to the Second Vatican Council. The word of God and its application is still able to be the springboard for various topics of relevance for our day.

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THE CREED

Although the Creed is not directly associated with the Word of God the public recitation of this statement of our beliefs summarizes our belief in the triune God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus and continues to be present with us through the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Apostles Creed (early second century AD) or the Nicene Creed (325 AD) is normally recited. In the Nicene Creed, which we normally use in our parish, the four marks of the Church—One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic are named. Unity is to be a mark of the Church. The Church is to be known as reflecting the holiness of God in its members. It is catholic, a word that means universal and for all, and able to be traced back to the apostles. It names the importance of Baptism, the forgiveness of sin and the resurrection of the dead. These tenets of our faith can find their roots in the Word of God and are part of what we call the tradition of our Church. This profession is an expansion and application of the Word of God in forming the teachings of the Church.

Prayers of the Faithful (Universal Prayer): These communal prayer intentions flow from the Word of God to help us apply the Word of God more fully into the living out of our faith. The intentions are to offer prayers for the good of the Church, the concerns of the world, and intentions that might be of a more particular nature. There is usually one prayed on behalf of deceased loved ones and this is where we specifically mention the intention of the Mass that people have requested.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

This is the second part of the Mass. This second liturgy, or gathering for the work of the people, in the Mass allows those gathered who have heard the Word of God to again direct their attention to the altar table for the work of now offering our sacrifice of praise to God. This offering is called ‘Eucharist’ from the Greek word meaning ‘Thanksgiving’ and is an offering of thanksgiving to God for Jesus Christ. The altar that has previously been honored at the beginning of the Mass is where this sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for Jesus is to be offered. It will be done in an unbloody manner where Christ’s body will be presented and offered to God under the forms of unleavened bread and wine. These foods were part of the last supper meal of Jesus with his apostles that is associated with the Passover event of the Old Testament exodus of God’s people from the slavery of Egypt. And it was requested by Jesus to use this meal of bread and wine as the basis of offering our sacrifice to God when he said, ‘Do this [offering of sacrifice] in memory of him.’

Preparation of the Gifts: At this time people who have gathered are invited to share in the offering of sacrifice by collecting their financial gifts and bringing them forward along with the bread and wine that will become the perfect offering of Jesus’ body and blood that will be offered to God on the altar. Originally, the gifts gathered would have been food and other material goods that would then be shared by the Church with those in need. These gifts are processed and presented by representatives of the community to the deacon and priest who will prepare them to be offered. To show honor to the body and blood their contents will become, the vessels carrying the bread and wine are to be of high quality materials and are often gold or silver plated. The vessel holding the bread is called a ciborium (from a Latin word meaning ‘to cover’) and the vessel used to hold the wine is called a chalice.
Preparation of the Cup: The deacon mixes a drop of water into the wine and pours the wine into a chalice (or chalices). This may have originally been a way of diluting an overly thick liquid to allow it to be shared more easily. Now it has a spiritual meaning. The prayer of the deacon says, ‘By the mystery of water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.’ In this the wine represents divinity and fullness of life, and the water represents us who join our limited life to this abundance of life.

Berakhah Prayers: The priest prays ancient blessing prayers based on Jewish foundations as he places the offering vessels on the altar. ‘Blessed are you, Lord God, of all creation...’ Food and wine are customarily recited in many Jewish homes as a grace before meals with similar words. This type of blessing prayer will also echo the way offerings were placed on the altar of sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem when sacrifices were offered there. Completing the blessing prayers, the priest bows and prays that the ‘Lord God receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we [prepare to] offer with humble and contrite hearts.’

Washing of Hands: The priest then washes his hands. This originally would have been a way to clean one’s body after the slaughter of the animals or preparations of the grains and placing them on the temple altar. Now this action carries a symbolic and spiritual meaning. The priest says, “Lord wash away my iniquity; cleanse me of my sin.”

Prayer over the Gifts: The priest now asks those gathered to pray that ‘our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.’ We pray that it be received ‘for the praise and glory of God’s name, for our good, and good of all his holy Church.’ The priest concludes this preparation of the altar for the sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for Jesus by praying another prayer: “Look upon the offerings of the Church, O Lord, as she makes her prayer to you, and grant that, when consumed by those who believe, they may bring ever greater holiness.’ The congregation responds: Amen.

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[The]people who have gathered are invited to share in the offering of sacrifice by ... bringing ... forward ... the bread and wine that will become the perfect offering of Jesus’ body and blood that will be offered to God on the altar.
After the gifts of bread and wine have been placed on the altar as the sacrifice and as the Passover meal of memory that Jesus share with his disciples in the upper room, the priest begins the prayer of Thanksgiving to God for Jesus, called the Eucharistic Prayer. This prayer is sometimes called ‘The Great Thanksgiving.’ Acting in the person of Christ as head of His body the Church, the priest offers our lives along with the life of Jesus in prayer as the perfect sacrifice to God, the Father of us all. The prayer puts us at the moments of Christ’s passion (suffering), death, and resurrection. There are thirteen approved Eucharistic Prayers. We usually use #2 or #3. We might say that this prayer is the heart of the Mass. It consists of various parts.

The Dialog: This ancient prayer begins the prayer with priest inviting hearts to be lifted up and asking that we give thanks to God to which all gathered say, ‘It is right and just.’

The Preface: This beginning (preface) of the prayer of thanksgiving is addressed to God the Father. There are over 80 prefaces that can be used. Multitudes of reasons are given for offering thanks to God, but all are culminated in reality that Jesus is the central reason for our thanksgiving. He is the one who directs us most fully to the Father through his life, death, and glorious resurrection.

The First Acclamation: The preface prayer led by the priest leads the congregation into a response of praise that recognizes that in worship we are in the heavenly realm of God. It echoes the prophet Isaiah’s experience of God and the response he hears the angels sing, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.’ (Is. 6:3) Our participation in this acclamation puts us in touch with the heavenly realm as we offer our prayer of worship. Here we are in heaven with the angels and the saints. The ‘hosts’ are all of the powers of heaven and earth and the blessed ‘one who comes in the name of the Lord’, whom we realize to be Jesus Christ. The ‘hosanna’ refrain comes from the Hebrew word for ‘Praise God!’

The Epiclesis: The congregation usually kneels after the Holy, Holy acclamation as it prepares for the calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine that are on the altar table. They are offered by human hands to be consecrated, that is, so that they may become Christ’s Body and Blood. A gesture of hands extended over the gifts accompanies this part of the Eucharistic prayer. A bell was once rung here to draw people’s attention to an action they did not easily see when the priest’s back was to the people. Now the congregation is able to see and a bell rung here is not necessary.

The Institution narrative and Consecration: The words and actions of Christ are then offered by the priest with the bread and wine and these words effect or re-present the sacrifice that Jesus instituted at the Last Supper and that was accomplished on the Cross on Good Friday. At the Last Supper, Jesus offered his Body and Blood under the species of bread and wine and gave them to the Apostles to eat and drink, and leaving with them the command to perpetuate his life in this same way. The elements are each raised and presented to the congregation and a genuflection (bending of the knee) or bowing of the head accompanies each action. Bells used to be rung at this time to draw attention to this action, but since the action is no longer impaired by the back of the priest, bell ringing is not necessary to observe this action.
The Anamnesis (Remembering) Acclamation: The congregation is asked to proclaim the ‘mystery of faith’ after the elements have been named as the Body and Blood of Christ. There are three that can be used. We often use, ‘When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death O Lord, until you come again.’ In our acclamation, we as people of faith recognize that Jesus’ life, passion, death, and resurrection are made present to us now under the forms of bread and wine.

The Oblation (offering): The priest then prays that the sacrifice of Jesus and our lives connected to his be accepted by God, our Father. It is this life that is offered to the Father as the perfect sacrifice.

The Intercessions: This part of the prayer of Thanksgiving to God for Jesus realizes that the Church continues to be the Body of Christ and is in communion with heaven and earth, with members living and dead. We remember our Church leaders with the Pope and our Bishop always being mentioned. It can include prayers for those just baptized, confirmed, wedded or being buried. The petitions help us see that we are all being called to participate in the redemption and salvation and fullness of life brought about by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus in his Body and Blood offered on the altar.

The Doxology (words of praise): The elements of the consecrated bread and wine, now to be recognized as the Body and Blood of Christ, are elevated at the conclusion of ‘The Great Thanksgiving’ in a gesture directed to heaven and to God the Father. The prayer offers glory, honor and praise to God through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. In Him we have access and relationship to the Father. The congregation responds with ‘AMEN’ (‘So it is!’ or ‘I believe!’) This is sometimes called the ‘Great Amen’ and concludes the Eucharistic Prayer.

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The Lord’s Prayer: After the Great Thanksgiving prayer to God for Jesus Christ has concluded with the Amen acclamation of the congregation, all stand and recognize that the offering of Jesus along with ourselves to the Father has been accepted. We are then invited by the priest who represents Jesus in the community to pray to the Father with Jesus present with us as he taught, and still teaches us, to pray: praying that God’s kingdom be present and that we be provided ‘daily bread’ for what we need to live in the reality of that kingdom. The consecrated bread and wine present before us as the very life of Jesus are the food that will nourish us to live as children of the kingdom of God, living in forgiveness of one another and knowing protection from temptations and evil. The prayer is based on the passage from St. Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 6:9-13) rather than the one from St. Luke’s Gospel (Lk 11:2-4).

The Lord’s Prayer is then interrupted by a short embolism prayer of the priest elaborating on God’s protection from evil. This is what makes it often look different than what our Protestant brothers and sisters pray. This extra prayer that dates back to the first centuries of Christians celebrating the Eucharist seems to be an explanation of why even today Pope Francis is saying the last petitions of the Lord’s Prayer (...lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil) need to be clear in realizing God isn’t responsible for leading us astray but is there to protect and to guide us.

Another doxology (words of praise) follows the embolism prayer. These words are often added by our Protestant brothers and sisters but are not Scriptural per say, but go back to the way the prayer was often concluded by the early Church. Unfortunately, in our Catholic prayer of the Communion Rite they are now translated into a more modern English language (for the kingdom...) and do not reflect the older English of the earlier prayer (thy kingdom come...).

The Sign of Peace: The priest then addresses Jesus present with us under the forms of bread and wine and asks that the peace and unity of the kingdom of God continue to mark the Church that has gathered in his name. The congregation affirms the prayer with their ‘Amen.’ The priest then announces Christ’s peace is present with us and the deacon invites all gathered to share or offer the peace of Christ with those around them. This is more than a welcome or a hospitality gesture. It was originally called the ‘holy kiss’ and included a heart to heart embrace of one person to another. Now a shaking of hands is normally an appropriate gesture or a kiss of affection for those who are married, or family members, or for those who are engaged.

The Lamb of God: The focus is then on the priest as he breaks the bread. This breaking of the bread is the way Jesus was known to be present with his early followers after his resurrection (Lk 24:13-35). Today usually only one larger piece of bread (called a host) is broken. At this time the other vessels to be used for the distribution of Holy Communion are also filled from the larger bowl (ciborium) that contains the consecrated bread. A small portion of bread from the larger host is also added to the chalice at this time which was originally a way the one Eucharist of the Bishop was able to be taken by the deacons to other communities for their Eucharistic celebrations as a sign of unity in the Church. Now it carries a symbolic meaning with the priest praying that the mingling of the body and blood of Christ will bring eternal life to those who receive it. During these gestures the congregation sings an ancient litany based on imagery from the Book of Revelation naming Jesus as the Lamb of God. It is Jesus offered on the altar that is the sacrifice that has taken away our sins and given us peace and reconciliation with the Father. The litany can go as long as is needed for the fractioning to be completed (now usually three refrains). The priest prays a silent prayer of preparation and the congregation is able to do so as well in a moment of silence.
The Call to Communion: The priest then holds the consecrated host over the chalice containing the consecrated wine and announces: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.’ The congregation then responds with the Scriptural verse spoken by the Roman centurion seeking healing for his servant: ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, speak only the word and my soul shall be healed.’ (Mt 8:8)

Reception of Holy Communion: The priest receives Holy Communion by first genuflecting in adoration of Jesus present with us and praying that the body of Christ bring him to eternal life. He then takes the host of consecrated bread and eats it. Then the priest takes the chalice and prays that the blood of Christ will bring him to eternal life and he drinks from the chalice of consecrated wine. The deacon and servers and other extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are then also presented Holy Communion under both species of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ. Next, those in the congregation rightly disposed come forward to receive Holy Communion. This procession is made towards the altar table where with Jesus we share in the banquet feast of heaven. A hymn with Eucharistic themes often accompanies this action of going to Holy Communion.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council the congregation would come and kneel at a railing that was understood to be an extension of the altar. Also prior to Vatican II, Holy Communion was shared only under the form of consecrated bread for the congregation. After the Second Vatican Council a more ancient practice for receiving Holy Communion was revived where those receiving Holy Communion come forward to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. A bow is made before receiving the consecrated bread. When the minister of Holy Communion announces, the Body of Christ the person says, Amen. One’s hands are opened one over the other to receive the Body of Christ in an ancient way of receiving Holy Communion where one’s hands become a sort of throne to ‘receive the King’ (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th century). It can also be received by opening one’s mouth and having the minister place the consecrated host on one’s tongue, a practice that became ordinary by 900 A.D. A bow is also to be made before receiving the consecrated wine. When the minister of Holy Communion announces, the Blood of Christ, the person says, Amen. This action of communicating (eating and drinking) completes the sacrificial action of Jesus who offered and gave his life, his Body and Blood, for us. We are now sharing in his life in us. It is appropriate after going to Holy Communion to return to one’s place and pray personally in thanksgiving to Jesus who is alive in our hearts.

Prayer after Communion: The priest leads the congregation in a prayer that concludes the whole Eucharistic Prayer thanking God for the gift of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Blessing and Dismissal: The congregation alive with the presence of Jesus with them in the Body of the Church is blessed and sent forth. The word Mass literally comes from this dismissal. The Latin translation means ‘go you are dismissed’. The expanded understanding is that we are to go out, alive with Jesus, to continue the journey of faith and life living the realities of the kingdom of God.

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“...where one’s hands become a sort of throne to ‘receive the King.’”
(St. Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th century)