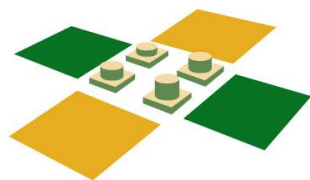


MERITA MISSAE

AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE LAY PERSON'S PRAYER
BEFORE AND DURING THE MASS
INTENDED FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT READ

ANONYMOUS
FOUND IN A LATER FIFTEENTH CENTURY MANUSCRIPT



THE
EXPERIENCE
OF WORSHIP
IN LATE MEDIEVAL
CATHEDRAL AND
PARISH CHURCH

The text of *Merita Missae* (The Virtues of the Mass) is found in British Library, Cotton MS Titus, A. xxvi, fols. 154-156, a manuscript from the third quarter of the fifteenth century. A nineteenth-century edition is printed in Appendix 5 of *The Lay Folks' Mass Book* ed. T. F. Symmons, transcribed Early English Text Society, Original Series, 71 (London, 1879). This reading is based on that edition, but spelling is modernised, some additions and explanations are added (in italic), and section divisions introduced to make the structure and sense clearer.

This is intended as a simple guide for unlettered persons preparing for and hearing Mass. It directs behaviour and posture as well as intentions in prayer – including silence before and after the Mass. At the heart of the narrative are the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, and God's redeeming love.

The teaching begins with the preparation for Mass on the evening, night and morning before. Comment on the Mass itself is selective: the lay person's entrance into church, the entrance and preparation of the priest, the Gospel, the priest's 'Prayer brethren' at the Offertory, the elevation of the Host, the second sacring and breaking of the Host, the priest's communion, and the washing of the sacred vessels. There is nothing directly about the concluding part of the Mass.

This verse has sometimes been attributed to John Lydgate, monk of Bury St Edmunds (c.1370-1449/50) – a prolific and well-regarded poet in his time. Among his religious verses is his more substantial Mass narrative, *The Vertues of the Mass*, from which two stanzas have been supplied on the end of the Mass.

[This text is addressed to the illiterate who can do no more than pick out the words of Pater Noster and Credo]

God of heaven, that shaped Earth and Hell,
Give me grace some word to tell
To the lewd that cannot read
But the Pater Noster and the Creed,
That I may tell you, or then I fare,
How ye shall pray, when and where,

And though ye can [*pray*], as well as I,
To hear my wit, it is no folly,
For sometime is a fool as good to hear
As the word of a friar.
And therefore, and it be your will,
When I speak, hold you still.

[Prayer in the evening, night and morning before the Mass]

At even when thou to bed shall go[ne],
To God thy Father thou make thy moan,
And look thou seize [*i.e. place*] into his hand
Life, soul, house, and land;
And say thy Pater Noster still,
And after, think no man none ill.

At midnight, if that thou may,
Rise and to thy Lord thou pray
In worship of his Passions all
He had by night in Caiaphas' hall.

And at morrow when thou dost wake,
Now is season with the Creed thou take.
The next word after that thou shalt name[n],
Ask thou the kingdom of heaven,
And for thy soul the same boon,
That it be saved at the day of doom.

And though thy body be of clay,
Set thou most therefore and pray,
That where in land it cometh or go[es],
That it be saved from shame or woe.

Bless thee then [*i.e. with the sign of the cross*], if that thou may,
And to the church take the way.

[Before the Mass]

When thou comest to the holy place,
Cast holy water in thy face,
And pray to God that made us all,
Thy venial [*i.e. pardonable*] sins must from thee fall.

Then look to the high altar,
And pray to him [*i.e. Christ*] that hangeth there,
[*i.e. the reserved sacrament in the pyx*]
Where in land that thou wend,
That he be at thy last End.
When thou hast asked that longeth to thee,
Worship ever the Trinity.

[The entrance of the priest, and the preparation]

And when the priest ringeth the bell,
Look thou hold thy tongue still.
His words are of such degree,
There falleth no man to speak but he;
And when thou seest the priest still, [*i.e. saying his confession*]
Pray thou then with good will,
Thou for him, and he for thee,
And that is a deed of charity.

[The Gospel reading]

And when the Gospel shall be read,
Listen as thou were adread,
For every tale of a king
Would have dreadful listening;
And what man say it is not so,
Be ready to fight ere thou go.
Then dare I say thou art a knight,
That dare fight in thy Lord's right.

[At the priest's bidding to pray for him before the Canon of the Mass]

And he biddeth you for to pray, *[i.e. Orate fratres ...]*
Look that ye say not nay,
But pray fast among you all,
That no temptation on him fall;
For he shall pray for you still,
Heaven['s] blisse he bring you till.

[At the elevation of the Host]

And when he ringeth the cross-bell, *[i.e. the sacring bell]*
Pray then for another skill,
That thou be worthy to see that sight,
That shall be in his hands light.
And when he resteth him up on height, *[i.e. raises the Host]*
Kneel a-down with all thy might,
And if thou ask any thing,
Speak dreadfully as to a king.
And look thou ask no thing of right,
But of his grace and of his might.

And *[if]* ye will awhile dwell,
A good example I will you tell:
If thou forfeit house and land,
It falleth into the king's hand.
That falleth thou in that case,
To put it into the king's grace.

And if thou make a suit of right,
Thou gettest it newer of grace nor gift.
Then read I thee, nought thou sue of right,
But of his grace and of his might.
And namely the gift of such a king,
That may so freely give all thing—
A king that made both sun and moon,
It cost him little to grant a boon.
Let thine heart hereon dwell,
There while I of the second tell.

[At the second sacring and the fraction of the Host]

When he hath that host in hand,
Look thou neither sit nor stand,
But do the reverence that thou can,
In tokening that he is both God and man.
There is no tongue that can tell,
The reverence that to him sell.

And when he parteth the host in two,
Think on the sorrow and on the woe,
That he suffered for thy sake,
When the Levites his veins brake;
And how he did for thee weep
To his Father on Olivet.

And if thine heart be good and kind,
This love thou have alway in mind.
And if men thee hypocrite call,
Let water out of thine eyes fall;
For lesser love shall none be,
Thou weep for him that wept for thee.
Of more love may no man tell,
Than died for love, and gone to hell,
Bind thine enemy, and beat him down,
And on thine head set a crown.

His heritage is so free,
In thy mischief shall give it thee.
His angel, at his commandment,
Thine enemy slain and all to-rent:
[i.e. the Passaover and Christ's atonement]
Let now no wordly thing
This *[divine]* love out of thine heart bring.

[The priest makes his communion]

And when he *[i.e. the priest]* is houseled with that host,
Pray then to the Holy Ghost,
What soothing a venture thee befall,
If that it be your housel all,
And if ye be in charity,
Ye be houseled as well as he:

His *[i.e. God's]* love and his much might
Giveth you housel in that sight.
And also ye that see him not,
If ye love him in all your thought,
Whither ye ride[n] or ye go[ne],
Let your love on him be one.

[The priest washes the vessels]

And when the priest goeth to the lavatory,
Taketh it in no vain glory;
But thank God with all thy might,
He giveth thee grace to see that sight.
For thou were wont when thou were young,
Covet fast to see a king;
Then hast thou seen that cost thee nought,
The king that all this world hath wrought,
The king that made both day and night, ...

[The text breaks goes on to consider famous kings, without comment on the post-communion prayer, the dismissal at the end of Mass, and the Last Gospel. Here therefore are stanzas 59 and 63 from Lydgate's Vertues of the Mass.]

59: Post-communion

At the Postcommon the priest doth him remew [*i.e. remove himself*]
On the right side [*of the altar*] saith Dominus Vobiscum.
Five times the people doth salu[te]
During the Mass, as made is mention:
Figure the day of his Resurrection,
Five times soothly [*i.e. truly*] he did appear
To his disciples for consolation,
And first of all to his mother dear.

63: Ite missa est

After the priest saith Ite missa est,
Granteth the people a manner of licence
To depart, and he toward the East
Lifteth up his hands, with due reverence,
Praying for all that were in presence,
To have their part of all that he hath do[ne],
Taking their leave, devoutly with silence,
The end abiding of In Principio.
[i.e. the Last Gospel – the opening verses of St John]

[From the end of Merita Missae]

God that made more and less,
Give us grace to hear Mass,
And so to fight, and to pray
That we be saved at doom[e]sday.