

“Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47).

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians celebrated the Eucharist together, though they called it the “breaking of the bread,” as we see in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles. The early Christians were Jews and did not see themselves as starting a new religion, but rather as a new development or “way” of living as faithful Jews, so they also continued to pray and worship within the Jewish community, participating in services of God’s Word in the synagogue and praying at the temple. Eventually, however, as more and more Gentiles, or non-Jews, joined the community, Christians began to understand just how new their faith was. The final step toward Christianity’s emergence as a world religion distinct from its Jewish roots was the expulsion of Christians from the Jewish community, including from synagogues and the temple, by the Jewish religious leaders. No longer able to celebrate God’s Word in the synagogue, Christians transferred the synagogue service to their gatherings with the breaking of the bread. Thus the basic, two-fold structure of the Mass as we know it today was born.

Our celebration of the Mass continues to have two basic parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, bookended by a brief Introductory Rite and Concluding Rite. In the Liturgy of the Word, we continue to hear the Sacred Scriptures that were proclaimed in the Eucharistic gatherings of those earliest Christians, and in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we continue to break the Bread of Life and to share the Cup of Eternal Salvation that nourished our forebears in the faith 2000 years ago. And from that time to now, the same Christ comes and makes his home with us in our Eucharistic celebration as we continue to follow his command to “do this in memory of me.”