You’ve entered an enormous church, elaborate, rich, artistic in decoration. A ceremony (Roman Catholic?) of some solemnity is in progress. You’re not “up” on this sort of thing but you can’t help but notice the bowing, kissing, incense, candles, and the ornateness of the vestments. Yes, it must be Roman Catholic. You’re anxious to discover what is taking place; perhaps you’d like to participate. Yet, the language is unfamiliar. Is it Latin? Although the choir is singing and the organ is playing, there’s little inclination to join in; the music is too elaborate, too complicated.

The priest, for the most part, has his back to you, his arms raised, almost defensively. And he’s so far away! And yet praying in whispers! You notice that you and the others present are not encouraged to be aware spectators, let alone active participants. So remote, so arcane it all appears.

You are somewhat scandalized by the sermon. It was short and so “stereotyped.” Did the preacher actually consider what he had to say important? It seems not. And how few of the congregation approached to receive Communion at that altar rail which served as one more barrier between priest and people! As if the language and distance and the elaboration of the ceremonial were not enough!

What a surprise when, during this liturgy, another priest with a young “server” came out to one of the many “side” altars of the Church and started what you later had identified as a private, “low” mass. Perhaps the few people who knelt by in silence knew and appreciated what was evolving, but perhaps not.

The site of this liturgy and liturgical context into which you have entered might have been St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Manhattan, or St. Helena’s Church, Philadelphia, or even, with modification in size and solemnity, the tiny mission church of Mooney Creek, Kansas, as late as 1964. Yet, it could also have been the Basilica of San Lorenzo Fuori Le Mura in Rome as early as 675, or Notre Dame de Paris in 1230. It might have been the Dom in Cologne or virtually any church or monastery in Christendom (later, Roman Catholic Christendom) from the 5th/6th century until the implementation of Vatican Council II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” 1964.

You suspect, however, that the Christian Eucharist was not always this a-social, this formal, this totally vertical. Christ and his apostles had a rather quiet, comfortable “liturgy” at the Last Supper. The early Christians surely understood what was going on and were involved when they gathered to worship. Places of all kinds, living quarters,