

# The Mystery of Faith

#3: GIVING THANKS

May 7, 2006

In this YEAR OF PRAYER AND RENEWAL, the entire parish has an opportunity to reflect on the rich mysteries of our faith, with a focus on our greatest prayer, the Mass. A spoken reflection at each Mass and a series of bulletin inserts will help us explore the Mass more deeply during this Eastertide. *You are invited to continue the discussion after the morning Masses at the coffee hour.*

## Presentation of the Gifts

As the servers prepare the altar, the ushers take up the collection. From the very beginning, Christians have expressed their devotion by the offering of gifts. In the early Church, the offering was a privilege of the baptized: only those who were to approach the table for communion were allowed to present gifts; and catechumens did not make an offering until the day of their baptism. Participation in the offering was, and is, a way of sharing in the fruits of the Mass itself, and “an expression of the priesthood of the faithful” (Cabié).

Some people have trouble with the collection basket. Didn't Jesus drive the moneychangers out the temple, they ask? Couldn't this money business be handled at some other time, outside of Mass? But it is precisely *during* the Mass, and at this critical point in the Mass, that the collection needs to happen. Money is one of our most powerful means of self-expression. What we spend our money on reveals not only our tastes, habits, and hobbies, but our priorities. “We should not think of the collection of money ... as some sort of banal, dirty but necessary affair,” writes Father Jeremy Driscoll. “Money is our work. Money is hours of our lives. And now we give it away, we sacrifice it, for the work of the Church.”

After the collection has been taken up, members of the assembly—representing all of those present—bring forward the gifts, not only the collection just taken, but, more importantly, the bread and wine to be consecrated during the



Eucharistic Prayer. In the bread and wine, we offer to God the work of our hands, and we ask him to transform them into the very body and blood of his Son. We ask for a “marvelous exchange,” and by faith we know that God will take the little we can offer and transform it into something altogether new and wonderful. In a symbolic way, we offer our lives along with these gifts, asking God to transform them as well.

## Dialogue

*The Lord be with you. And also with you. Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give him thanks and praise.*

With these words, the Eucharistic Prayer begins, the heart of the Mass. It is one great prayer, which concludes with what is sometimes called ‘the great Amen.’ This opening dialogue is among the most ancient parts of the Christian liturgy, and was prayed at the Eucharistic celebration as early as the 2nd century.

Following the dialogue comes the preface, which is “a poem... the song of the world discovering its salvation” (Béguerie); and because it is a poem, it is most often sung.

The Preface is addressed to God the Father (as is the entire Eucharistic Prayer). There are many prefaces—the *Sacramentary* includes nearly 90 for various feasts and seasons. Each of them expresses, in one way or another, why we give thanks, by painting the history of salvation with strokes that are bold and broad. Why do we give thanks? Because God has given us Christ his Son, who in his living, dying, and rising has brought us new life. It is as simple and as amazing as that!

Each preface concludes with an invitation to join in song: not just any song, but the Sanctus, the “Holy, holy, holy,” the song of the heavenly liturgy (Isaiah 6: 3-4; Revelation 4: 8). As Father Deiss observes, at this moment the liturgy looks to the

cosmos. "The perspective is immense. It is both on earth and in heaven that the angels and humanity, along with all of creation, unite in a common exultation.... To the question: Is the cosmic universe, with its millions of stars and its millions of light-years, interested in our Eucharist? The liturgy answers: Yes, for Christ is the firstborn of creation." (Deiss)

## PRAYER and Action

It is hard to give just one name to this great prayer. The Greeks used the word *anaphora*, which meant "elevation, lifting up," and suggested offering. St. Gregory the Great called it simply *prex*, prayer. In Rome, the term *canon actionis* came to be used, which literally means 'the rule for the action.' Eventually *actionis* was dropped and the prayer was called simply the canon. It would have made more sense to drop *canon* and keep *actionis*! For this prayer is an action; these words make something happen. As with all our sacramental celebrations, word, sign, and gesture are inseparable from each other. "There is no fully satisfactory name for this action that is unparalleled in human experience" (Cabié).

After an introduction, which varies in length, each of the Eucharistic Prayers begins by invoking the power of the Holy Spirit. The priest extends his hands over the gifts and prays, "Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ" (EP II). He then makes the sign of the cross over the bread and wine that have been presented by the faithful.

The laying on of hands is one of the most ancient and powerful signs of blessing. "Many of our sacramental rituals, such as confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and ordination, include this laying on of hands. Here, the laying on of hands invokes the Spirit, by whose power alone our offering can become the body and blood of Christ" (Champlin). This is a holy moment: in fact, in many of the Eastern Churches this moment of the

invocation of the Holy Spirit is seen as the moment of consecration.

After the invocation of the Spirit comes the institution narrative, as the priest—praying in Christ's own words—tells the story of the Last Supper. "In this elaborate act of remembering... that original event becomes the event of the community that hears it... We enter into the hour of Christ" (Driscoll).

It is important to notice the shift in tense in the institution narrative. The first part is in past tense, in familiar storytelling style: "On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise." But when we come to the words Jesus spoke on that night, we move into present tense: "This is my body." Why? Because we believe that Christ truly becomes present in this moment, as present as on the first Holy Thursday when he himself broke the bread and gave the cup. His present becomes our present. We acknowledge this in the Memorial Acclamation, sung by the people, when we proclaim the death of the Lord, celebrate his presence, and look to his future coming: "We proclaim your death until you come in glory."

After holding up the bread, and then the cup, for all to see, the priest genuflects, a sign of adoration. It is a sign of the change that has taken place. The simple signs—bread and wine—have become the body and blood of Christ.

Explore the Eucharistic Prayer in more detail at [www.stjames-cathedral.org](http://www.stjames-cathedral.org). **Next week:**

**Communion.**

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy

## FOR FURTHER READING

- Joseph Champlin. *Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*\*
- Lucien Deiss. *The Mass*\*
- Jeremy Driscoll, OSB. *What Happens at Mass*\*
- Michael Gaudoin-Parker. *The Real Presence Through the Ages*\*

\* Look for these titles in the Cathedral Bookstore

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- The word *eucharist* means *thanksgiving*. What do I give thanks for today?
- What are my gifts? Do I share my time, my treasure, my self, with the parish community? Or do I feel that I don't have anything to offer?
- How do you participate in the Eucharistic Prayer? What most struck you in listening to and praying during the Eucharistic Prayer today?