

THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY

PART 4 OF 5

FEBRUARY 16, 2020

EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER AND COMMUNION RITE

The Eucharistic Prayer

The altar is prepared; the bread and wine are placed upon it; now we enter into the Eucharistic Prayer.

The first part of the prayer is called the Preface. This is not a preface in the sense of foreword or introduction. (We usually skip those!) This is a preface in the Latin sense of the word, something spoken before the people. The preface is a prayer, addressed (like the entire Eucharistic Prayer) to God the Father, in which we give thanks to God. The Missal contains more than fifty different prefaces, each of which praises God for a different aspect of the mystery of salvation: for the coming of Christ in human flesh at Christmas, for his glorious Resurrection at Easter, for God's provident care for humanity, for the saints, for the gift of the liturgy itself, with its times for penance and rejoicing. Every preface concludes with an invitation to join in the hymn of the angels, the Sanctus, the Holy, Holy, Holy.

The Sanctus is a song of praise, recognizing the power of God, whose glory fills heaven and earth. The text is drawn from two passages of Scripture. The first part is from Isaiah's vision of seraphim worshiping before the throne of God: "'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!'" (6:2-3). The second part, beginning "Blessed is he," has deep Scriptural roots as well. Most directly, it recalls the words of those who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem a few days before his Passion: "'Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest'" (Matthew 21:9). In the Sanctus, we lift up our hearts and unite our voices and prayer with the unending prayer of heaven. At the altar, the distance between earth and heaven narrows to a vanishing point.

Following the Sanctus, we kneel as the priest prays the words of the Eucharistic Prayer. Addressing God the Father, the priest prays on behalf of the community. This prayer is the heart of the Mass. The Missal includes ten different Eucharistic Prayers, all of which following the same pattern. We praise and give thanks. The priest calls down the Holy Spirit on the gifts of bread and wine, extending hands over them in what is called the epiclesis. Then comes the institution narrative—the story of what happened on the night of



ABOVE: The beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer in the *Gellone Sacramentary*, which dates to the 700s.

the Last Supper is told, as the priest takes first the bread, and then the cup. While the entire Eucharistic Prayer is consecratory, the words of Jesus in the institution narrative are especially important. We sing an acclamation of remembrance and praise. Christ, crucified for our salvation, is present upon the altar.

In the second part of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Church offers the Body and Blood of Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit, and we ask that we may offer ourselves in the same way, so that all may be one in God. The priest then offers a series of intercessions—prayers for the members of the Church, both living and dead. The Pope and the bishop of the diocese are mentioned by name. The Eucharistic Prayer ends with a doxology of praise—"Through him, with him, in him"—and we join in and assent to all of this with our sung "Amen."

Sacrament and Sacrifice

Catholics call the Eucharist by many names: we call it Eucharist (Greek for "thanksgiving"), "Breaking of

the Bread,” “Lord’s Supper,” “Holy Sacrifice,” “sacrifice of praise” (cf. CCC, 1328-32). The many names reflect the many different dimensions of this great mystery. We will never plumb its depths or understand it fully.

What does it mean to call the Mass a sacrifice? Jesus died on the cross, once, for all; that sacrifice cannot be not repeated. But the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross cannot be contained, either. In the Mass, we are not simply remembering a past event; the mystery of Christ’s dying and rising is made present to us. Thus the Eucharist we celebrate and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross are not different things, but one single sacrifice.

As we remember what Jesus does for us, the Church’s offering is united with Christ’s sacrifice. Thus, as we pray the Mass, we can offer our lives, our praise, our suffering, our prayer, our work, to be united with Christ’s self-offering, and they gain new value (CCC, 1368). Thus the Mass is Christ’s sacrifice and the Church’s sacrifice, too.

Our liturgical remembering of Christ’s sacrifice at Mass comes to life in our own lives when we imitate Christ’s self-emptying and self-sacrificing love. We participate in the life of Christ by dying to self, so that we can live the sacrificial sacrament in which we share.

The Communion Rite

Following the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, we enter into the fourth part of the Mass, the Communion Rite. We have gathered in Christ’s name, we have listened to Christ’s word; Christ’s saving action has been remembered and renewed in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Now we receive the sacrament we celebrate in the high point of our participation, the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

The communion rite begins with the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. As we pray this prayer, we enter into the prayer of Jesus himself: a prayer that praises God, that seeks only daily bread—and that makes a bargain: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Before we come to the altar, we pray for forgiveness and reconciliation. The Lord’s Prayer flows naturally into the exchange of peace, in which we turn to those who are already one with us in the Body of Christ, and share the peace of Christ.

The “breaking of the bread” was one of the most ancient names for the Eucharist. It was in the breaking of bread that the disciples on the road to Emmaus finally recognized that their companion was Jesus himself. In the Mass, the host is broken and divided as we pray to Christ as the Lamb of God. This prayer is at once universal and individual—we acknowledge Christ as the one who takes away the sins “of the world,” and we ask mercy for ourselves. Christ, the Savior of all, comes to each of us.

The Eucharistic species, the bread and wine, are not brought to us or passed through the pews. Instead, we move towards the altar in procession. Communion isn’t something that just happens to us. Communion is something we assent to; something we do. The host can be received in the hand or on the tongue. Receiving in the hand is the more ancient practice; receiving on the tongue became common, and then mandatory, in the Middle Ages. The measure of our devotion is not, of course, in whether we open our hands or our mouth to receive, but whether we open our hearts to Christ and to those with whom we share this life.

Communion: we use the word to describe the consecrated bread and wine—“receiving communion.” But the word implies more than that. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ—we become one with him and with all the others who are joined to him in this sacrament. “As grain, once scattered on the hillsides, was in this broken bread made one,” we sing in the ancient hymn, “so from all lands thy Church be gathered into thy kingdom by thy Son.” Communion means communion with this community, these people. The Body of Christ is not a thing. It is a living reality. The sacrament we receive is a sacrament of unity.

This is the spirit of the liturgy: thanksgiving and praise; remembrance and presence; transformation.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

A Prayer before Communion

Lord Jesus Christ,
as I come to this feast of faith,
strengthen my faith in your presence.
Receiving your Body,
may I be united with you
and with all who share at this table.
Receiving your Blood,
may my sins be washed away.
In this holy moment,
I bring before you
my needs, my sufferings, my regrets;
my hopes, my thanksgiving.
As I walk towards the altar,
I bring with me those I love
and those I find it difficult to love.
As I join in this holy banquet,
I pray for all families and all nations,
that peace and unity may flow from here
to touch every corner of the world. Amen.