

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 8: The Eucharistic Prayer, Part I

The Mass is overflowing with spiritual power in many elements and the Eucharistic Prayer along with Communion is the center and summit of the entire celebration. There are four principal Eucharistic Prayers and what happens during these prayers is truly spectacular. It is the pre-eminent liturgical prayer of the Church. It is a single liturgical act, consisting of several parts woven together as a beautifully crafted masterpiece. In each part, we are called to fully attentive listening, responding, singing and praying; encountering the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as active participants in these proceedings. As we contemplate what is really happening at Mass, the wisdom of the Church's insistence on our participation at Mass every weekend becomes more and more clear.

Today's reflection is the first of three on the structure, elements and actions of this spiritual powerhouse, the Eucharistic Prayer. We will explore the first few parts – the Preface, the Sanctus and the Epiclesis.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a familiar three-part dialog between the priest and the congregation, where he draws us into this next phase of the celebration. The priest begins by, saying, "The Lord be with you." We respond, "And with your spirit." Then, lifting his hands, he says "Lift up your hearts," to which we reply, "We lift them up to the Lord." With hands extended widely, he asks us to express our praise and gratitude by, saying, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." And we respond, "It is right and just." In this dialogue we are made conscious of our close union with the presiding priest who speaks in the name of all.

The priest then begins the Preface, which means, "proclamation". The

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Preface proclaims the wonderful actions of God, both throughout history and in our lives, and offers thanks to God for all these blessings. The Preface is a variable prayer, with over eighty choices for different feast days, liturgical seasons, votive Masses and special occasions.

The Preface concludes with the Sanctus in which the whole assembly joins the song of the angels in giving praise to God in heaven. The text is inspired by the vision in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. There he recounts seeing the Lord seated on a lofty throne, with Seraphim, each with six wings, stationed above and crying to one another “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with his glory.” At every Mass, we connect with the ongoing heavenly liturgy, joining in this magnificent thundering of praise for God. The verse “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, is the acclamation used by the people to greet Christ at his solemn entrance into Jerusalem. The dialogue with the people and the “Holy, Holy” should ordinarily be sung.

The celebration advances to the Epiclesis, which is the calling down of the Holy Spirit. It is a petition asking that the Father send the Holy Spirit to “make holy” or “sanctify” the gifts on the altar so that they may become the Body and Blood of the Lord. To sanctify is a role properly attributed to the Holy Spirit who completes and brings to fullness the work of the Father and the Son. As the priest makes this petition, we see him extend his hands over the gifts of bread and wine in the ancient gesture signifying the giving of the Holy Spirit so that the gifts are sanctified.

The second part dovetails with the first. Just as the Eucharistic Prayer is part of a continuous action extending from the preparation of the gifts to Holy Communion, so are the [words of institution](#) part of the Eucharistic Prayer. They are an account of key events at the Last Supper, including

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the words used by Jesus to institute this rite, commanding that it be done perpetually by the Church in his memory, not just merely recalling it but re-presenting it.

The whole Eucharistic Prayer relates to the **consecration**, but the words of institution in particular are seen as actually bringing about the change in the gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. We should listen intently with our ears, our minds and our hearts as these sacred actions unfold, noting the gestures of the priest at this time and the deliberation with which he speaks and acts. At this point, the priest is addressing himself primarily to God the Father. He is not doing something solely for the people to see and hear, but even more-so that the Father may see and hear this sacred action. Thus, the holy Sacrifice of Himself, which Christ instituted during the Last Supper, is affected and re-presented to the Father. The priest is acting in the person of Christ. Jesus is the victim and the priest.

The priest retells what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper, not just in words, but also in gestures - lifting the bread, raising his eyes to heaven, bowing over the gifts. The priest says the words of Christ over the bread, which the people have presented for this celebration, the very words he said to the apostles at the Last Supper *“Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you.”* Without speaking, he presents or shows the host to the people for all to see and adore, then genuflects in adoration. This action may occur in silence or bells may be briefly rung.

The prayer and gestures are then repeated with the wine. The words are familiar, *“Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.”*

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By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Body and Blood of Christ are now on the altar, but still under the appearance of bread and wine. This change in substance is referred to by the Church as “[transubstantiation](#).” The elements still taste like bread and wine, but Faith tells us that Christ is truly present. We are invited to worthily receive the body and blood of Christ for our spiritual nourishment and to deepen our union with God.

The priest then draws us directly into the action as he sings the “*Mystery of Faith*” referring to the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s death, resurrection and presence among his people, inviting our acclamation. With a sense of the profound nature of what has unfolded on our behalf, the priest’s invitation hopefully summons a heartfelt response sung by the entire assembly. We sing one of three responses addressed to Christ, for example: “*When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again*” thereby affirming our belief that the whole mystery of the Risen Christ is present and active in the celebration.