

Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, S.T.L.

Part 11: Eucharistic Canon

We just finished with the Preface and the “Holy Holy Holy”, a prayer which is taken directly from the book of Revelation. Reminded of the fact that we are united with the heavenly choirs in praise of the “Lamb who was slain”, the congregation kneels in adoration of the great mystery that is unfolding before our eyes: through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are ‘stepping outside of time’ and witnessing the one sacrifice of Christ at Calvary take place through sacramental signs.

The Eucharistic prayer, or *Canon*, has a fascinating history which we can’t get into in great depth here. As you may notice, the Missalettes have 4 options printed. This is a new development after the Second Vatican Council. Since the council of Trent, there was only one option—Eucharistic prayer 1! The text of Eucharistic prayer 1 can be traced with certainty to at least the end of the 4th Century, since we find large quotations of it in St. Ambrose of Milan’s catechetical instruction *De Sacramentis*,¹ while other scholars would date it even earlier. Eucharistic prayer two was intended to be a ‘reconstruction’ of a Eucharistic prayer from earlier texts², thereby making it ‘older’ than Eucharistic prayer one, but some scholars question the accuracy of the reconstruction. In any case, the variety of prayers was introduced in an attempt to more accurately reflect the situation in the early Church and the current reality in many Eastern Churches. In the United States, we have, in addition to the 4 Eucharistic prayers in the Missalette, a few other Eucharistic Prayers “for various needs” that are approved for use.

However varied the prayers may be, all of them must have the *institution narrative*, that is, the scriptural narration of the last supper event with the words of consecration used by Christ—“This is my body...This is the chalice of my blood...”³. Without the words of consecration, a mass is *invalid*—i.e. the bread and wine *do not change* into the Body and Blood of Christ. If we remember our catechism, every valid sacrament of the Church has both *matter* and *form*. If one of these is missing, the sacrament doesn’t happen. For example, the *matter* of baptism is an unbaptized person and water; the *form* is pouring the water or immersing the person while saying the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The *matter* of the Eucharist is unleavened bread (for the Latin rite) and wine, while the *form* is the words of consecration. The matter of the Sacrament of reconciliation is a repentant person; the form is the words of absolution: “I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

You might wonder why this matters. It matters because the faithful, unless they are prohibited by Church law, have a right to the sacraments of the Church!⁴ If priests play around with the matter or

¹ <http://www.catholictradition.org/Eucharist/mass-h5.htm>

² Hippolytus’ *Traditio Apostolica* and others

³ “Hic est enim Calix sanguinis mei...” are the words of Jesus from the Latin Vulgate Bible, which is still the official bible of the Roman Catholic Church where doctrine is concerned. “Calix” translates to chalice.

⁴ Code of Canon Law, Canon 213

words of the sacraments, they are abusing their people—denying them of their ‘rights’ to receive valid sacraments! In the last century, we saw abuses of the Eucharist, where people experimented with things like “Pizza and beer” masses, or other similar nonsense. Some priests made up their own words of absolution in the confessional. Some people were invalidly baptized in the name of the “Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier” because of an attempt to avoid ‘sexist’ language. We cannot ‘invent’ new matter or form for the sacraments to suit our tastes or make them more ‘relevant’—they are instituted by Christ and handed down to us by the Church. It is only the Universal Magisterium that can make changes to the matter or form of the sacraments, not any individual priest or community. The very reason we call ourselves “Catholic” is because that word means ‘universal’—the faith and the sacraments celebrated in Taiwan are the same as they are in Chile, the Philippines, and in the United States. When we become too ‘parochial’, too focused on our local church building and our own particular tastes, we become Congregationalists.