The Meaning of the Mass: Part Five
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

The Common Preface IV states: “For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift since our praises add nothing to your greatness, but profit us for salvation.” This preface is a reminder that all of Christian life, especially our liturgical life, is founded upon God’s initiative. The community is gathered as the Body of Christ in worship, first and foremost, because God draws us together through the Spirit who dwells within each of us by our baptism. The primary purpose, then, of the liturgical celebration is that this worship of God should lead to our sanctification and salvation.

The Introductory Rites begin the Mass and invite us to enter into the liturgy as one people. The Church teaches us that the purpose of this section of the Mass is “that the faithful coming together take on the form of a community and prepare themselves to listen to God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist properly.” The elements of the Introductory Rites are intended to foster a sense of unity among the assembly, as a community that is being drawn together by the Spirit. Within this community, assembled by that Spirit, our attention is drawn to the presence of the Lord among those who are gathered in his name. This presence of Christ challenges us as a community and as individuals to reflect on how we have—or have not—lived out our faith in Christ during the past week. This leads us to both implore the Lord’s mercy, and glorify and praise him. As the community prepares to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word, some aspect of the mystery of the Lord’s work in salvation is brought forth in our prayer; in a sense it describes the character of the celebration.

Another important aspect of the Introductory Rites is its attention to the Trinitarian nature of the celebration, seen particularly in the sign of the cross, the Gloria, and the Collect. As we come to celebrate and participate in the Paschal Mystery (Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension), we are drawn more deeply into sharing in the life of the Trinity. For, in the liturgy, we come to worship the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. By our participation, then, we recognize the ultimate purpose of our lives, which is to come to that day that we pray for in Eucharist Prayer III “…when Christ will raise our mortal bodies and make them like his own in glory… There [the kingdom of God] we hope to share in your glory when every tear will be wiped away. On that day we shall see you, our God, as you are. We shall become like you and praise you forever through Christ our Lord.”

The Introductory Rites contain: the entrance chant, apostolic greeting, penitential act, Kyrie, Gloria (when appropriate to the season), and Collect. Each action in the Introductory Rites is directed, in a sense, to help us quiet down in order to recognize Christ who is both in us and with us through the other members of the community. And each action helps us to slowly close out the distractions of the world and focus on the God who loves us and desires us to know his love and mercy. Over the next few weeks we will explore each action, to learn a little of its history and how it helps us to be more open to the presence of God in us and with us.