

Pastor's Message

In our reflection on the Mass we come now to a consideration of the heart of the liturgy of the Eucharist, the Eucharistic prayer. This prayer, said by the priest on behalf of all gathered, is built on ancient Jewish prayers and some of the oldest documents found describing how the early church celebrated the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the chalice. For the priest, at least for this priest, the most difficult part of celebrating the Mass is praying the Eucharistic prayer. I can actually see eyes glaze over and people disconnecting from what we are collectively doing because the Eucharistic prayers are so long and not very poetic or engaging. That is too bad because the Eucharistic prayers teach us well how to pray and contain much of what we believe.

Currently the Roman Catholic church (Eastern Orthodox Catholic churches have others) gives us four main Eucharistic prayers, two additional prayers of reconciliation and four others for various needs. For those of us who remember the days before the Vatican Council, those ten Eucharistic prayers are a feast. The old Latin rite had only one, the Roman Canon. Notice that the prayer many of us grew up with was called a "canon" or "rule, law, or principle" rather than a prayer. We were taught that the Mass was more like a rigid rule to be done and obeyed than a prayer helping us to be in dialogue and communication (communion) with God. In the early church the Eucharistic prayer was most definitely not a rule but a prayer of thanksgiving for all the gifts that God has given us. Eucharist in Greek means "giving thanks"!

Our Eucharistic prayer is modeled after and similar to the Jewish prayer that accompanies the recitation of the central prayer in Judaism, the "Shema Israel": *Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one*. This prayer is ancient, rich, and central to Jewish life and belief. The earliest documentation that we have of our church at prayer comes from 150 AD. It implies that we had gathered for a meal together, gives thanks for the readings of the apostles and prophets that we had shared and discussed (the liturgy of the Word) and then says: "and then (the presider) makes a long 'eucharist' (thanksgiving) for having been judged worthy of all these good things. When he is finished, all the people present give their assent with an 'Amen!'" ("Amen" in Hebrew means "So be it."). This earliest document goes on to say: "then those whom we call 'deacons' distribute to each one present the consecrated bread, wine and water; and they also carry them to those who are absent. This food we call 'Eucharist'".

The Eucharistic prayers are meant to gather all of our prayers together in one great chorus of "giving thanks" to God. May that be so here at St. Matthew's and wherever the Eucharist is prayed and celebrated.

Fr. Chris