

Pastor's Message

We only have a very few documents that describe how the Eucharist was celebrated and prayed in our earliest communities. There is a fascinating description of the Eucharist in a document called the Didache (Teaching) from 96 AD but scholars hesitate calling it a Eucharistic prayer because it may have been a prayer before the Eucharist was celebrated. Still, this document shows that from our earliest days as a church we prayed the Eucharist very much like it is prayed today. We do have a document that is clearly a Eucharistic prayer from Hippolytus of Rome from around 215 AD. This Eucharistic prayer is still prayed today. In our missal it is Eucharistic prayer II. This prayer has been prayed by the Christian community over the bread and the wine for 2,000 years.

This Eucharistic prayer of Hippolytus is remarkably simple and well structured. Many scholars believe that Hippolytus wrote this prayer because during his time bishop's would improvise their Eucharistic prayers. Just like today I imagine that some bishops could do this well while others not so well. Hippolytus writes: "It is not necessary that the bishop take up the formulas which have been consigned higher up as though he had to force himself to say them by heart in his thanksgiving to God. Let each one pray according to his capacities. If someone is capable of praying a long time while uttering a solemn prayer, that is good...provided that his prayer is sound and conforms to orthodoxy." Hippolytus wanted to make sure that every bishop prayed correctly and well. Some things never change!

Hippolytus' prayer can be divided into six parts which remain the structure for all our Eucharistic prayers to this day. He begins with an acclamation: "The Lord be with you! Let all respond: And with your spirit! Let us lift up our hearts. They are turned to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord! It is right and just!" Sounds familiar, no? The acclamation is followed by a thanksgiving, the institution narrative (words said over the bread and wine), the anamnesis (the memorial acclamation), the epiclesis (the calling down of the Holy Spirit), and finally the doxology (through him and with him and in him...) which concludes with the great "Amen". Over the next few weeks these reflections will look at each of these parts individually to see their purpose and meaning.

During the fourth and fifth centuries other Eucharistic prayers from other Christian communities were written down and shared especially in the eastern orthodox churches. The Second Vatican Council adopted and introduced some of these into our western missal in their reform. Thanks be to God we have now more ways to voice our prayers to God in the central prayer of the church, the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic prayer because it is prayed on behalf of the community by the priest is the part of the Mass in which many people "zone out", lose focus and get bored. That is too bad because these prayers express the heart of what we believe and how we are to pray. I invite you to listen more deeply to these prayers prayed on behalf of us all so that together we can enter ever more deeply into the great mystery that is the Mass.

Fr. Chris