

Lesson 16b: The Four Great Eucharistic Prayers

Last time we talked about the Preface – the prayer that is on the very threshold of the prayer that is at the very Center of the Mass – The Eucharistic Prayer.

The Roman Rite has 13 Eucharist Prayers or anaphoras; ten of which are included in the Sacramentary – the book containing all the prayers for the Mass. In the early Church, the prayers of the Mass were not written down so the celebrating priests were responsible for composing them as he offered the Mass. This created a fair amount of problems for the average priest so very soon a defined set prayers were established. In time three canons came to be used more frequently by Byzantine Christians: The anaphora of St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil and a Pre-Sanctified Liturgy by St. Gregory the Theologian. In the West, only one prayer was predominately used called the Roman Canon or what we now call Eucharistic Prayer I. After the Second Vatican Council three other canons were added and, as mentioned earlier, there are several others for use on special occasions.

Eucharistic Prayer I:

This prayer, also known as the Roman Canon and with some variation was being used by Pope Gregory the Great as early as 600 AD in Rome. It

was used with very little change in wording up to shortly after Vatican II in 1964. Even today, Pope St. Gregory the Great would recognize the prayer even though it is being said in English rather than the liturgical Greek that was used in his lifetime.

Eucharistic Prayer II:

This ancient prayer traces its origins all the way back to the persecutions of third century Rome. Pope St. Hippolytus is said to have composed this anaphora because of the need to keep the Mass short because of the danger of being discovered by those who were persecuting the Church. This is a powerful prayer when prayed with reverence.

Eucharistic Prayer III:

This is a new prayer based largely on the liturgical scholarship of Dom Cyprian Vagaggini, OSB. This prayer was composed by drawing from Alexandrian, Byzantine, Gallican, and Maronite Eucharistic Prayers. Unlike the Second and Fourth Eucharistic Prayers, which are based on more ancient prayers, this new prayer brings to the fore the role of the Holy Spirit. This prayer is stylistically closest to the Roman Canon (EP I).

Eucharistic Prayer IV.

This anaphora most closely resembles the Eucharistic Prayer composed St. Basil (329-379 AD), a priest and archbishop Caesarea in what is now

southeastern Turkey. Basil was known as a great defender of the faith and orator.

Next time, we will talk about some of the important parts that are in all of the Eucharistic Prayers.