

Believe Celebrate Live **THE EUCHARIST**

Giving Thanks

The Liturgy of the Eucharist Begins

This is a time of transition. Several things happen at once. The altar is prepared for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. A collection is gathered up. There is song from the assembly or choir. These various activities have a single purpose: to prepare the sacred place and the assembly for the holy sacrifice that is about to take place.

Preparation of the Altar

Before Mass began, the altar was simply covered. Now the preparations continue. A white cloth called a corporal (from the Latin word for body, because upon it will rest the Body of Christ) is placed. After the bread and wine are brought to the altar, they—and the vessels that contain them—are placed, with the book containing the texts of the priest’s prayers.

All of these preparations should be quite familiar to us, for they are similar to the preparations we make at home for any solemn feast: unfolding the best tablecloth, setting the table for the meal, lighting the candles. But this is more than a festive meal; it is also a sacrifice, for “the Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* #12), and “the Christian altar is by its very nature a table of sacrifice and at the same time a table of the paschal banquet” (*Rite of Dedication of a Church and Altar* #4). The dual nature of the Lord’s Supper—sacrifice and holy meal—is clearly visible. Both of these images, holy sacrifice and heavenly banquet, are used side by side throughout the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Presentation of the Gifts

As the altar is prepared, our gifts are gathered together and presented. From Christianity’s very beginning, we have expressed our devotion by the offering of gifts. In the early church, the offering was

a privilege of the baptized. Only those who were to approach the table for Communion were allowed to present gifts; catechumens did not make an offering until the day of their baptism. Participation in the offering was, and is, a way of sharing in the fruits of the Mass itself, and “an expression of the priesthood of the faithful” (Cabié, *The Eucharist*, p. 82).

Some people have questioned the place of the collection basket. Didn’t Jesus drive the money-changers out of the temple, they ask? Couldn’t this money business be handled at some other time, outside of Mass? But it is precisely during the Mass, and at this critical point in the Mass, that the collection needs to happen. Money is one of our most powerful means of self-expression. What we spend our money on reveals our tastes, habits, and hobbies—our priorities. “We should not think of the collection of money . . . as some sort of banal, dirty but necessary affair,” writes Father Jeremy Driscoll. “Money is our work. Money is hours of our lives. And now we give it away, we sacrifice it, for the work of the Church” (Driscoll, *What Happens at Mass*, p. 61).

After the collection has been taken up, members of the assembly—representing all of those present—bring forward the gifts, not only the monetary collection just taken, but more importantly, the bread and wine to be consecrated during the Eucharistic Prayer. In the bread and wine, we offer to God these signs of the work of our hands, and we ask the Father to transform them into the very Body and Blood of the Son. We ask for this marvelous exchange, and by faith we know that God will take the little we can offer and transform it into something altogether new and wonderful. In a symbolic way, we offer our lives along with these gifts, asking God to transform them as well.

Preparation of the Gifts: Little Mysteries

Once the gifts of bread and wine have been placed on the altar, there follows a series of prayers and ritual actions that Father Driscoll calls “little mysteries,” for while they take only a few moments, they are full of meaning. Some of these prayers are said silently by the priest; others are said aloud when there is no music accompanying the rites. First the priest holds up the bread that has just been presented. Silently he prays in words that derive from the Jewish tradition, the *Kiddush* prayers for the Sabbath and feast days that Jesus himself prayed at the Last Supper: “*Baruch atah Adonai . . .*” “Blessed are you, Lord, God . . .” When these prayers are said aloud, the people respond “Blessed be God forever,” thanking God ahead of time for the great transformation of these gifts that the Spirit’s power will effect.

Next a small amount of water is added to the wine that has been brought forward. This rite once had a very pragmatic function, especially in ancient times, when some wine was so thick that it needed to be diluted before it could be drunk, with two parts water to one part wine! But it is probably safe to say that no part of the Mass is purely functional. Everything has meaning. The mingling of the water and wine “can symbolize many truths of the faith,” as Msgr. Champlin observes (Champlin, *The Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*, p. 86). In the West, the mingling of wine and water was seen as emblematic of the union of Christ with the faithful, the mingling of his sinless Sonship with our sinful state. The Eastern Church had a different perspective on the same rite: The two natures of Christ, divine and human, were represented in the wine and water.

A beautiful prayer, prayed silently by the priest, accompanies this ritual: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” If every Sunday is a little Easter, then surely every Sunday is also a little Christmas, for the Mass is rich in allusions to Jesus as Emmanuel, the incarnate Word in our mortal flesh.

Next the priest pours some of the wine to which water has been added into the chalice and raises it

slightly, again praying in words that derive from the Jewish tradition, offering to God the fruit of the vine as he has just offered the gifts of the earth.

Having presented both the bread and wine, the priest bows over the gifts, and prays silently: “Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts” (*Sacramentary*). These words are from the prayer of Azariah in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:39–40), when, far from home in an enemy land and unable to offer sacrifice, the young men offered themselves instead: “As though it were holocausts of rams and bullocks, / or thousands of fat lambs, / So let our sacrifice be in your presence today, / as we follow you unreservedly.” The prayer reminds us of the poverty of what we are able to offer to God—coming before God with empty hands, as St. Thérèse of Lisieux put it—and the power of God to transform it.

Finally, the priest washes his hands, praying silently, “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.” This is one of the few times in the Mass when the priest prays in the first person, for himself. It is thought that the washing of hands came about at this point in the liturgy for practical reasons—receiving the gifts in the early church was sometimes a messy business!—but it has a symbolic significance as well. In the ordination rite, the hands of the priest are anointed with holy chrism while the bishop prays, “May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God” (*Rite of Ordination* #24). His hands are anointed, set apart, for the sacrifice of the Mass. The ordination rite also includes a variation on the presentation of the gifts at Mass. The new priest receives the gifts and bread and wine from the faithful for the first time with the injunction to “Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate; model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross” (*Rite of Ordination* #26).

As the priest washes his hands, we are reminded that we all need God’s forgiveness; we all need to purify our hearts and our lives as we approach the Lord’s table. This “little mystery” is part of the insistent rhythm of the Mass, a rhythm of wonder, praise, and reconciliation.

Invitation and Response

The table is prepared; the offering is ready. We stand as the priest-presider invites us to pray that the sacrifice we are about to make might be acceptable to God. We take our part, asking that the Lord accept the sacrifice we all offer through the hands of the priest, that God's name might be praised and glorified so that we and all the Church might receive its grace.

This invitation and response emphasize the sacrificial nature of the holy meal in which we are to partake. We are reminded that we are not mere onlookers, but active participants in the sacrifice. It is a sacrifice we all offer, and it is ours in the broadest possible way. "The Eucharistic celebration in your community, in your parish, is the offering of the sacrifice of the entire Church. Your assembly . . . does not create or invent its own Mass. Rather, you are invited to move beyond yourselves to enter into the action of the entire Church which is the action of Christ himself" (Lustiger, *La Messe*, p. 89).

Our response to the priest's invitation also points to the two primary purposes of this holy sacrifice. Here we worship God, and God sanctifies those who worship. "Eucharist" literally means "thanksgiving," and the great prayer that is about to begin is one in which the overwhelming theme is thanksgiving. But in praising the holiness of God, we also grow in holiness. The liturgy reminds us of this again and again: "You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in holiness" (Preface of Weekdays IV).

In the words of St. Cyprian, "When we rise for the prayer, beloved, we must watch and apply ourselves with all our hearts to prayer. Let all carnal and worldly thoughts be cast aside, let the soul think of nothing other than praying" (Deiss, p. 69).

Prayer over the Gifts

In the liturgy of the 1570 Missal, this prayer was called the "secret" prayer. It was "secret" not because its content was mysterious, but because it was prayed in silence by the priest, who only recited the conclusion aloud: *per omnia saecula saeculorum*

(forever and ever). The prayer over the gifts is short, simple, and easily missed, but as with many of the prayers in our Roman Rite, more is meant than meets the ear. As Robert Cabié observes, these prayers are "filled with the words used in the Eucharistic Prayer for the sacrificial offering," and often express in short summary all we hope this liturgy will accomplish in our lives (Cabié, p. 84). They express the belief that in offering back to God what God has given us, we receive the gift of Christ once again (Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time), and that our offering both gives God true worship and makes us one with God (Twenty-third Sunday), entreats that our individual worship may help bring salvation to all (Twenty-fourth Sunday), and asks God that the gifts offered will bring us God's love and forgiveness and allow us to serve God freely (Twenty-ninth Sunday).

Preface Dialogue

With the words exchanged between the priest and the assembly, in which they once again express their desire for the Lord in their midst, the Eucharistic Prayer begins, the heart of the Mass. It is one great prayer, which concludes with what is sometimes called the "Great" Amen. This opening dialogue is among the most ancient parts of the Christian liturgy, and was prayed at the eucharistic celebration as early as the second century.

Twice already in the Mass the presider has greeted us with the words "The Lord be with you"—at the very beginning of Mass, and again before the Gospel reading. "What would be the reason for repeating such a greeting now in the middle?" asks Father Driscoll. "After all, priest and people have had plenty of exchange already up to this point. The greeting is repeated precisely because we are going to start praying now with much greater intensity, and if we are to manage it, we will need divine help" (Driscoll, p. 74). The exchange that follows tells us how we are to pray: by lifting up our hearts, going to a level our prayer has not yet attained. Finally the priest invites us to join in the entire prayer of thanksgiving, to give thanks to the Lord our God, and we assent that to do this is right; it is why we are all here.

Preface Prayer

Following the dialogue comes the preface prayer, so called not because it comes before the Eucharistic Prayer (of which it is the beginning) but because it is said before all the people. In English usage, a preface is usually the part of the book we can skip if we so choose. But the liturgical preface is much more than that. It is “a poem . . . the song of the world discovering its salvation” (Philippe Béguerie, quoted by Lucien Deiss, *The Mass*, p. 70). Because it is a poem of our liturgy, it is meant to be sung.

The preface is addressed to God the Father (as is the entire Eucharistic Prayer). There are many prefaces. The *Roman Missal* includes nearly ninety, to focus our prayer for the various feasts and seasons of the year. Each of them expresses, in one way or another, why we give thanks, by painting the history of salvation with strokes that are bold and broad. Why do we give thanks? Because God the Father has given us Christ, who in his living, dying, and rising has brought us new life. It is as simple and as amazing as that!

Holy, Holy, Holy

Each preface concludes with an invitation to join in song—not just any song, but the Sanctus, the “Holy, holy, holy,” the song of the heavenly liturgy (Isaiah 6:3–4; Revelation 4:8). At this moment in the Mass, at the beginning of our great prayer of thanksgiving, we join in the liturgy of heaven, where “day and night they do not stop exclaiming: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty’ ” (Revelation 4:8). Our song lasts only a moment, but for this moment we sing the music of the choirs of angels, the song of the great company of saints and all the powers of heaven. These invitations to song are well worth listening to. They invite us to take our place in the communion of saints, which unites us to all the faithful, the living and the dead. In union with them we sing the unending hymn of praise, the triumphant hymn, the song of joy, and the new song of creation.

As Father Deiss observes, at this moment the liturgy looks to the cosmos. “The text of Isaiah reads: ‘The earth is full of his glory.’ The liturgy substitutes: ‘Heaven and earth are full of your

glory.’ The perspective is enlarged; it is immense. It is both on earth and in heaven that the angels and humanity, along with all of creation, unite in a common exultation. . . . To the question: Is the cosmic universe, with its millions of stars and its millions of light-years, interested in our Eucharist? The liturgy answers: Yes, for Christ is the firstborn of creation” (Deiss, p. 72).

The Language of the Liturgy

The liturgy has always been polyglot; that is, it has always been prayed in several languages. (The “Latin Mass” has never been entirely in Latin!) Throughout the liturgy (“embedded like precious stones,” writes Cardinal Lustiger [p. 51]) are words and phrases from other tongues that have survived all the chances and changes of centuries to become part of the very language of prayer. Thus we pray in Greek *Kyrie eleison*, “Lord, have mercy.” We pray in Hebrew *Amen*, “So be it”; *Alleluia*, “Praise God”; *Hosanna*, “Grant salvation.” And in Advent, we even pray in Aramaic, the language Jesus himself spoke, when we say *Maran atha!* “Come, Lord Jesus, come!”

Following the Sanctus, we kneel for the first time at Mass. Kneeling can signify many things—it can be a sign of repentance, entreaty, or worship. At this moment, we kneel in adoration, acknowledging our smallness and poverty in the presence of an awesome God. In the description of the heavenly liturgy in Revelation, the twenty-four elders respond to the “Holy, holy, holy” by throwing themselves down before God, casting their crowns at his feet and exclaiming, “Worthy are you!” And after we sing our Hosannas, we too fall to our knees in acknowledgment that God is truly present in our midst, on earth as in heaven.

Prayer and Action

It is hard to give just one name to this great prayer. The Greeks used the word *anaphora*, which meant “elevation, lifting up,” and also suggested offering. St. Gregory the Great called it simply *prex*, prayer. In Rome, the term *canon actionis* came to be used,

which literally means “the rule for the action.” Eventually *actionis* was dropped and the prayer was called simply the canon. Perhaps it would have made more sense to drop *canon* and keep *actionis*, for this prayer is an action; these words make something happen. As with all our sacramental celebrations, word, sign, and gesture are inseparable from each other. “There is no fully satisfactory name for this action that is unparalleled in human experience” (Cabié, p. 90).

There are special opening prayers for every Sunday of the year and a great variety of preface prayers as well. The same is not true, in the Western tradition, for this central prayer of the Mass. In fact, for some hundreds of years, there was just one Eucharistic Prayer, the same at every single Mass, known as the Roman Canon. This prayer was considered immutable—or so it seemed—and there was considerable hubbub when, in 1962, Pope John XXIII actually changed the Canon by inserting the name of St. Joseph after that of the Blessed Virgin Mary!

This well-established and unchangeable approach was very far from the practice of the early church, when it was common for the one presiding to improvise this prayer. One early guidebook provided some simple rules; for example, “The prayer at the altar should always be addressed to the Father.” The second-century martyr St. Justin describes an early Eucharist, noting how each would pray and give thanks according to his ability.

The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council provided several additional Eucharistic Prayers, restoring some of the ancient richness to this part of the Mass. The old Roman Canon still holds pride of place as the first Eucharistic Prayer. The second Eucharistic Prayer is the most ancient, based on the earliest existing text, attributed to St. Hippolytus, who died around 235. Eucharistic Prayer III is a new prayer, composed in response to the Second Vatican Council, and “is without doubt the most elaborate on the theological level” (Deiss, p. 69). Eucharistic Prayer IV is not often heard because of its great length and its rather difficult language; it is based on the Eastern *anaphoras*, particularly those of a fourth-

century saint, Basil the Great. In addition to the four principal Eucharistic Prayers, there are also three adapted to the understanding of children, and two more for Masses of Reconciliation.

Different as they are, all of the Eucharistic Prayers have a similar shape. This great prayer falls into five principal parts: invocation, narrative, remembering, intercessions, doxology.

Invocation of the Holy Spirit

After an introduction, which varies in length, each of the Eucharistic Prayers begins by invoking the power of the Holy Spirit. The priest extends his hands over the gifts and prays that the Spirit will descend on the bread and wine so they will become the Body and Blood of Christ. He then makes the sign of the cross over the bread and wine that have been presented by the faithful.

The laying on of hands is one of the most ancient and powerful signs of blessing. “Many of our sacramental rituals, such as confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and ordination, include this laying on of hands. Here, the laying on of hands invokes the Spirit, by whose power alone our offering can become the body and blood of Christ” (Champlin, p. 97). This is a holy moment; in fact, in many of the Eastern Churches this moment of the invocation of the Holy Spirit is seen as the moment of consecration.

Narrative Account of the Institution

After the invocation of the Spirit comes the institution narrative, as the priest—praying the words of Christ as recounted by the evangelists—tells the story of the Last Supper. “In this elaborate act of remembering . . . that original event becomes the event of the community that hears it. . . . We enter into the hour of Christ” (Driscoll, p. 71). Though the Eucharistic Prayer is one single prayer, the institution narrative is set apart in various ways. The rubrics emphasize that these words, even more than the others, should be spoken clearly and distinctly. The priest bows slightly. The host and then the chalice are held high for all to see. Bells are rung. An acclamation is sung by all the people.

The Church teaches that the entire Eucharistic Prayer, from preface dialogue to final Amen, is consecratory; but at the same time special reverence is given to the words of Christ. While it is the priest who speaks the prayer, “the entire liturgical assembly is celebrating and consecrating” (Cardinal Yves Congar, as quoted in Deiss, p. 81).

It is important to notice the shift in tense in the institution narrative. The first part is in past tense, in familiar storytelling style: “On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise.” But when we come to the words Jesus spoke on that night, we move into present tense: “This is my body.” Why? Because we believe that Christ truly becomes present in this moment, as present as when he himself first broke the bread and gave the cup. His present, his “now,” becomes our own. We acknowledge this in the memorial acclamation sung by all the people, when we proclaim the mystery of our faith present among us: the death of the Lord, his resurrected life, and our belief in his future coming.

Remembering and Offering

After singing the memorial acclamation, we enter a new part of the Eucharistic Prayer, called the *anamnesis* or remembering. Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me.”

As we fulfill Christ’s command to act in his memory we can offer to God what he has given to us: a sacrifice that is not merely holy, but perfect (Eucharistic Prayer I); the heavenly feast given to us in life-giving bread and in the saving cup (II). In making this offering we offer ourselves, as the Body of Christ in the Spirit, as well, asking the Father to accept us along with Christ, and to make us an everlasting gift (III). At the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest invoked the Holy Spirit over the gifts; now we pray in a second invocation that Holy Spirit will come upon all of us, that we will be filled with the Spirit through our sharing (II) and that we will, in the unity of the Spirit, be brought together by our communion in Christ’s Body and Blood (II).

Intercessions

Next the Eucharistic Prayer moves into a series of intercessions for various needs, more formal than the prayers of the faithful that concluded the Liturgy of the Word. “While still in this sacred, powerful, and special moment, the priest in the people’s name calls upon those in heaven, the saints, to speak on our behalf” (Champlin, p. 101). We pray for the Church throughout the world, asking God to bless it with faith and love, with unity and peace. We pray for our pope and our local bishop, mentioning them by name; we pray for all the clergy and the faithful. We pray for the dead who have gone before us. And finally, we pray to God for ourselves. We ask for God’s forgiveness and mercy, and we implore that God will make us worthy to share eternal life.

Earlier in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we sang the song of the heavenly liturgy, and at the conclusion of our prayer we invoke the communion of saints again, asking the prayers of all the saints in heaven. The first Eucharistic Prayer includes not one but two wonderful litanies of names, a long, breathless reminder of how much heavenly help we have—John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia, and all the saints. The end of the Eucharistic Prayer takes us back where we began, to the liturgy of heaven, a place where we will enjoy forever the vision of God’s glory, or, as the second prayer for reconciliation says, “In that new world, where the fullness of your peace will be revealed, gather people of every race, language, and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ the Lord.”

Doxology and Amen

The Eucharistic Prayers always conclude with a doxology sung by the priest. Here, as at other points in the Mass—the Gloria, for example—the words of praise defy the rules of grammar, and language seems to struggle to express what the heart nevertheless understands: that we pray *through* Christ, *with* Christ, *in* Christ. We pray as one in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Our prayer gives all glory and honor to God, our almighty Father, forever and ever. As the priest

chants this prayer to the triune God, he holds up the consecrated bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ. This time, the elements are not held up for us to see and adore; rather, they are held up in a “gesture of offering” to God the Father (Deiss, p. 88). “We would not be wrong to think of the Father as being overwhelmed by what He sees coming toward Him. He sees His Son coming and the whole world reconciled to Him in the body of His Son” (Driscoll, p. 107).

To this doxology—to the entire Eucharistic Prayer—the assembly sings “Amen!” It is no wonder that this

is often called the “Great” Amen, because “This is the biggest Amen of the Mass and so is the biggest Amen in the world. . . . This Amen contains all the others. . . . In the Mass, from our own place and time, we are spliced into this eternal Amen, and we shall sing forever what we are singing now. Amen!” (Driscoll, pp. 107–108).

Joining in the final Amen is one of the most important ways in which the faithful participate in the Eucharistic Prayer. We should make it count! We should make it resound!