

THE PARTS OF THE MASS

Part Four: *The Liturgy of the Eucharist*

The Liturgy of the Eucharist consists of everything from the Procession of the Gifts to the altar to the Prayer after Communion. Today we will talk about the Preparation of the Gifts and the Eucharistic Prayer.

The action of the people bringing forth the bread, the wine, and the collection to the altar comes from the ancient days of Christianity when the bread and wine used for the Eucharist came from people's homes and the collection consisted of money and goods that people donated that would be used for the Church. The Procession of the Gifts to the altar symbolizes that we bring the stuff of our lives to God so that, like the bread and wine, our lives, including the difficult and painful stuff, will be transformed into the presence of Christ.

Although the congregation usually sings a Preparation Hymn at this point, the priest meanwhile prays over the gifts with prayers that come from Judaism. They are called *Berakah* prayers in which we bless God for the fruits of creation that we have received and which we will soon offer in return to God. The priest prays: "BLESSED ARE YOU, LORD GOD OF ALL CREATION, FOR THROUGH YOUR GOODNESS WE HAVE THE BREAD/THE WINE WE OFFER YOU: FRUIT OF THE EARTH [or FRUIT OF THE VINE] AND WORK OF HUMAN HANDS, IT WILL BECOME FOR US THE BREAD OF LIFE [or OUR SPIRITUAL DRINK]." Notice how the prayer recognizes that the bread and wine come from both God's goodness and human labor.

Then the priest invites the congregation to join in a prayer over the gifts. The priest will say: "PRAY, BROTHERS AND SISTERS THAT MY SACRIFICE AND YOURS MAY BE ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, THE ALMIGHTY FATHER. You will respond: 'MAY THE LORD ACCEPT THE SACRIFICE AT YOUR HANDS FOR THE PRAISE AND GLORY OF HIS NAME, FOR OUR GOOD AND THE GOOD OF ALL HIS HOLY CHURCH.'"

This prayer reminds us that we are now entering into the unfolding of the sacrifice of the Mass. This sacrifice is the self-offering of Christ on the Cross to God for the sake of God's People. We join ourselves to that self-offering in offering of the bread and wine, which are to symbolize all the sacrifices for God and for God's People that we make in our own lives. That is why the sacrifice of the Mass is the sacrifice of Christ AND the sacrifice of the priest and the sacrifice of the people joined to Christ.

Next we move into the most important prayer of the Mass, which is known as the Eucharistic Prayer. And because it is so important I need to remind everyone that this is not the time to walk out of church or let your children walk out of church for the bathroom. This is the most sacred act of worship during the liturgy.

It begins with the Preface Dialogue between the priest and the people and then moves to the Preface Prayer, which is the prelude to the formal Eucharistic Prayer. The Preface always praises God for what God has done for us in Christ. There are specific prefaces for the special seasons and holydays of the year. The Preface leads into the singing of the Holy, Holy, Holy.

The wording has changed to “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts,” instead of “Lord God almighty.” The word “hosts” does not refer to the communion wafer but rather to the multitude of angels and saints in heaven that sing praise to God. We join in the song of praise of the heavenly hosts.

The praise of God continues with the formal Eucharistic Prayer. You will notice that the wording of the Eucharistic Prayers will change and become more formal in tone, again to match the Latin originals. While the priest is the one who speaks the words of the Eucharistic Prayer out loud, the content of the prayer is to be spoken in the hearts and minds of the entire congregation. In this way, we are all joining ourselves to Christ, who is the one who is offering this prayer to the Father in unity with the Holy Spirit.

Shortly into the prayer we have what is called the *epiclesis*, which is the invoking of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine so that they might be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. After this the priest prays the words of institution. They are not called the “words of consecration,” since the entire Eucharistic Prayer is consecratory. They are the words of institution because they make present the moment that Christ instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper.

Please keep in mind that because we are standing we are to make a gesture of reverence each time the priest kneels. After the prayer over the bread and then again over the wine, when the priest genuflects everyone in the congregation is to make a profound bow from the waist.

Then the priest invites us to acclaim the Paschal Mystery of Faith, which is our belief in the saving death and resurrection of Christ and his coming again in glory. That mystery is rendered present in the Eucharist and it forms the essence of the real presence of Christ that we receive in communion.

Then we pray the second half of the Eucharistic Prayer which always focuses on our unity with all of God’s People, living and dead. We honor Mary and the saints. We unite ourselves with the pope and our bishop and recognize our link with the Church throughout the world. We remember our deceased loved ones and all who have died.

We end the Eucharistic Prayer with the Doxology and Great Amen. The priest sums up our central act of worship as an action through, with and in Christ to the glory and honor of God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. And to this the congregation resoundingly sings “Amen,” which means “So be it.” By singing “Amen” we are professing our willingness to let the sacrifice of Christ, which has become present to us in the Eucharistic Prayer, now begin to unfold in our own lives. We are agreeing to become persons who foster unity with God and with all of God’s people. This is why right after the Eucharistic Prayer we pray the wonderful prayer of unity, the Our Father, which will be part of next week’s presentation.