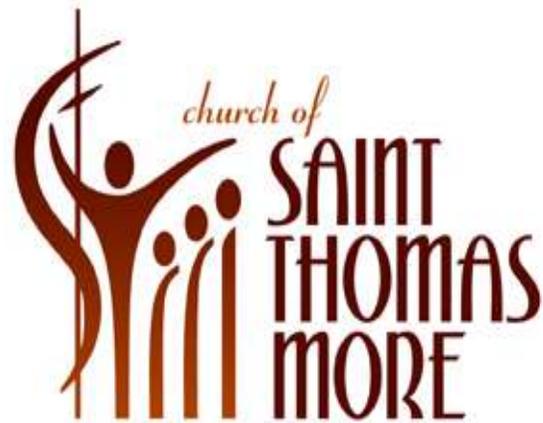


The Eucharistic Prayer

Our Eucharistic Prayer, the prayer voiced by the priest at the center of our mass, is closely connected with Jewish table prayers. These prayers of blessing, praising and thanking gained great importance on holy feasts such as Passover.

At the beginning of the meal, the head of the family or community uttered the *berakah*, a prayer praising God, saying “Blessed are you, Lord God, king of the world, who has brought bread from heaven”. The bread was then broken and given to all present. Various courses of the meal followed, with special foods and prayers, like the *haggadah* of Passover, which praises God for granting the Israelites freedom from Egypt.



Toward the end of the meal, the leader takes a cup of wine and prays another *berakah*, this one consisting of three sections: 1) praising God for all creation; 2) thanksgiving for the covenant, the law, the whole history of salvation; and 3) petitions that God’s creative and redemptive actions be continued and renewed, especially in the coming of the Messiah. Sound familiar?

The Synoptic Gospels say Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal at what we call the Last Supper. This summer, I attended a symposium at Notre Dame on whether Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The debate continues, but all agree that the Last Supper had strong Passover connotations for the early Christians.

What is significant is that Jesus, while voicing the traditional meal *berakah*, gave it new meaning by adding the words, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” He then added a new dimension to the third part of the prayer when he commanded, “Do this in memory of me.”

The disciples continued to gather for table fellowship after Christ’s death and resurrection. When the traditional Jewish prayers were used, they were altered to reflect the community’s experience in the Lord. The biggest change was moving the Eucharist away from the regular meal.

The original prayer over the bread was brief, so the longer and more theologically developed blessing over the cup became the basis for a prayer of praise and thanksgiving over the bread and wine together. There were no books to follow, the presider improvised around the *berakah* structure, with its themes of praise, thanksgiving and petition. Now, however, we praise and thank God for granting us freedom from sin through Christ.

History

Originally, the presider improvised these prayers, around a basic structure. Sometime in the fourth century, the extemporaneous prayers gave way to fixed formula, which still differed from region to region. The Eastern Church maintained several Eucharistic Prayers, but the Roman rite developed a single, unified prayer. We know this as Eucharistic Prayer I: the Roman Canon.

The text was set by Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) based on the wording likely developed in the fourth century. The Canon was originally proclaimed or sung, so that it could be heard by all. But by the second half of the ninth century, it came to be prayed in a low voice, especially the words of consecration. This development was probably the result of the Mass being understood as a “mystery” with the priest alone entering into the “holy of holies” at this point.

The liturgical reforms of the 1960’s encouraged the priest to once again proclaim aloud the entire Eucharistic Prayer. In 1964, Rome appointed a special committee to study the Eucharistic Prayer. Some found the Roman Canon, despite being the traditional prayer of our Eucharistic doctrine, had some problems. It’s long, repetitious, and lacks several elements of praise. Various reforms were proposed, but the committee soon realized they couldn’t significantly modify the Canon without damaging the integrity of the prayer.

So, in 1968 they published the Roman Canon, now called Eucharistic Prayer I, and issued three alternative Eucharistic Prayers: II, III, and IV. In 1974, three Eucharistic Prayers for masses with children were approved. There are two Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation, issued in 1975, which we use during Lent and other times of reconciliation. Finally, in 1995 the first Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions was authorized for use until the revision of the Sacramentary is approved. Three others have since been authorized.

Center & Summit

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal calls the Eucharistic Prayer the “center and summit of the entire celebration.” The document goes on to remind us this is **NOT** just a prayer of the priest: “the meaning of the Prayer is that the entire congregation of the faithful should join itself with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice.” (GIRM 78)

Despite its many forms, which we looked at last week, the Eucharistic Prayer follows a certain structure, as outlined in the General Instruction:

Thanksgiving (especially expressed in the Preface) in which we give praise and thanks to God for our salvation.

Acclamation (the Sanctus or “Holy Holy”)

Epiclesis: invoking the Holy Spirit to consecrate the gifts offered by human hands to become the Body and Blood of Christ.

Institution Narrative & Consecration: following the words and actions of Christ, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.”

Anamnesis (Memorial Acclamation) in which we acclaim Christ’s death and resurrection and look forward to his coming in glory.

Offering: “The Church’s intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learn to offer themselves and so day by day to be consummated, through Christ the Mediator, into unity with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all.” (GIRM 79f)

Intercessions: petitions for the entire Church, our Pope and Bishop, and for those living and dead.

Final Doxology: in which we give glory to God through Christ, with him and in him, and this glorification is confirmed with our resounding “Amen.”

Preface

Although the theme of giving thanks and praise characterizes the entire Eucharistic Prayer, those elements particularly appear in the “Preface”, which literally means “to say beforehand”.

We are used to seeing a “preface” in many books. The point of the preface is to set out the purpose and scope of the work, which will then be explored in detail. In the same way, the Preface to our Eucharistic Prayer states the reason for the praising God. Seasons of the Church year have an assigned Preface, as do many feast days and votive masses. The current Sacramentary contains more than 80 individual Prefaces, but all follow the same formula.

The Preface begins with a dialogue, and the tradition of this dialogue dating from the earliest Christian celebrations is a testament to its importance. The presider proclaims, “The Lord be with you”, to which we respond “and also with you” or in a closer translation of the Latin, “and with your spirit.” The phrase “Lift up your hearts” is found in Lamentations 3: 41. Finally, “Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God” probably stems from Jewish table prayer, where it was part of the prayer of blessing over the cup. In this opening dialogue, we are conscious of our union with the presider in offering this prayer. The presider speaks in the name of us all.

The body of each Preface follows the pattern of the Jewish *barakah*, or blessing prayer. It is a statement of the special reason for praising God, especially God’s work in creation and redemption. Focusing attention on a particular aspect of salvation history or giving a quick glance at some mystery or feast, the Preface is the keynote of the praise and thanksgiving that will follow in the Eucharistic Prayer.

We conclude the Preface with an acclamation of praise, the Sanctus, or “Holy Holy”, another element borrowed from Judaism, which we explore further next week.

Thus, the Preface is a strong beginning to the summary of what it means for us to celebrate the Eucharist. This is why the General Instruction on the Roman Missal calls the Eucharistic Prayer “the center and summit of the entire celebration.” (GIRM 78)

Sanctus – Holy Holy Holy Lord

When we view the Eucharistic Prayer as the great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, nothing could begin this prayer better than the Sanctus.

Those familiar words “Holy, holy, holy, Lord” are the perfect acclamation of praise to answer the words of thanksgiving expressed by the priest in the Preface.

Those words are inspired by the vision of Isaiah 6: 2-3, in which the prophet sees the Lord on a throne of glory and hears Seraphim cry out: "Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" We currently translate "Lord of hosts" as "God of power and might", but a proposed change approved by U.S. Bishops in June and currently under review in Rome would bring the acclamation text closer to the original.

This acclamation is one of the oldest still in use in the mass. We know it was sung in the synagogue morning prayer from at least the second century, a prayer that was familiar to the communities left behind by the apostles. It made its way into the liturgies of the Western world by the mid-fifth century.

The phrases "Hosanna in the highest!" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of Lord!" are very familiar to us, and not just from the Sanctus. We know them from the first Gospel of Palm/Passion Sunday. The words are the acclamation used by the people to greet Jesus in his triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

By the mid-sixth century these two acclamations, from Isaiah and Matthew (21:9) were joined together in Gaul (now France) and incorporated into liturgies in Rome a century later, called the "Sanctus".

The acclamation was originally sung by the whole assembly, but as the mass began to be proclaimed in Latin, complex melodies were composed for the choir to sing the Sanctus while the priest spoke the Eucharistic Prayer quietly. Many of these musical settings were timed so that the words "Blessed is he..." were sung right after the words of institution. Of course, this all led to the assembly simply watching and listening to the choir. Not quite the "full, conscious and active" participation we know today.

Thankfully, church documents now state with conviction that the Sanctus is an acclamation that is to be sung by all. In *Music in Catholic Worship*, the U.S. Bishops declare that the Holy Holy "ought to be sung even at masses in which little else is sung." (MCW #54)

Epiclesis – Calling Down the Spirit

Continuing our look at the Eucharistic Prayer, we come to a technical term - "Epiclesis", a Greek word that means "invocation". In most of the Eucharistic Prayers we hear at mass, the priest will ask that God accept our sacrifice, that it will be filled with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. In short, we are asking God to send the Spirit upon the bread and wine, and upon us. What a powerful request!

This invocation stems from the Jewish table prayer over the cup, which looks forward into the future and asks God to re-establish the house of David. For the early Christians, who expected the Second Coming to re-establish the kingdom of God, this petition would also involve the work of the Holy Spirit. For Jesus said, "After I am gone, I will send the Spirit to you." (John 16: 7)

In the Roman Canon, which we know as Eucharistic Prayer 1, there is no specific mention of the Holy Spirit, but there is an epiclesis after the words of consecration, asking that the sacrifice be borne to the heavenly altar by an angel and that those participating "be filled with every grace and blessing."

However, all the Eucharistic Prayers issued after Vatican II contain a specific request that the Spirit come. Listen closely to the words of each prayer and you will hear the petition asking God to send the Spirit to “make holy” or “sanctify” the offerings so that they “become” or are “changed into” the Lord’s body and blood. It varies from prayer to prayer, but you will hear similar words in each.

Along with the words comes a specific gesture. You will see the presider extend his hands over the bread and wine. This is the ancient symbol of invoking the Holy Spirit. This gesture is followed by a sign of the cross over the gifts, but that second gesture is indeed secondary. When there are several priest concelebrating, you will see each of them extend their hands, or at least their right hand, in the direction of the gifts until the presider has made that sign of the cross.

Listen to the words: “**we** bring you these gifts...”, “**we** ask you...” With the presider, we pray that the Holy Spirit will descend upon everything we offer - the bread, the wine, and our lives - and make it holy. The Church teaches that we do not offer Christ alone, we offer ourselves, our lives. As the U.S. Bishops write on their website: “Most wonderful of all, although our offering is itself imperfect, joined with the offering of Christ, it becomes *perfect* praise and thanksgiving to the Father.”

Institution Narrative

The Words of Institution, what are commonly called the “Consecration”, recall the words Jesus himself used at the Last Supper. This narrative is found in almost every Eucharistic Prayer that has come down to us from the earliest days of the Church.

Although the entire Eucharistic Celebration of the Mass is a ritual remembrance of what Christ said and did in that upper room two thousand years ago, the Institution Narrative captures the event in both word and deed.

These words, and the actions that accompany them, not only make present Christ’s Body and Blood, they also represent the totality of the Paschal Mystery - Christ’s life, death, resurrection and coming again in glory.

When training Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, I will often take them through a guided meditation on what goes into making bread, or wine. In the case of bread, we talk about the grains of wheat, planted in the ground, where there are worms and microbes, and the sunshine and water it takes to make the seed grow, and the farmers who work the fields, and their sweat, and the salt and the yeast, and heat of the oven to bake the bread, and the family who sits to eat the meal.

We talk too, about the failure to care for the land, the water we take for granted, the people who work the fields for less than a decent wage, my father, who sweat to put food on the table, the family members who share the meal, even the family members I may not always love as I should, and the image that hits the hardest: that it is not only bread is put in ovens - in the 1940’s people put other people in ovens.

And over all this, everything that goes into making the bread, the good and the bad - the wonders and the atrocities, we hear the words of Christ: “This is my body.”

So it is not just bread and wine that are consecrated; everything in our lives is consecrated, we ourselves are consecrated, when we place ourselves on the altar.

As Lawrence Johnson so beautifully writes: *“All that God has accomplished in creation and salvation history is fulfilled, signified, and made present in the person of the crucified and risen Christ. Christ’s words are a promise, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, they accomplish what they signify: his Eucharistic body and blood, his real presence with all the riches of the Kingdom.”* (from “The Mystery of Faith” by Lawrence Johnson, published by the FDLC, 1994 revised edition)

Elevation

Along with those words of institution, “This is my body This is my blood”, we have long associated an action.

While reciting the words of institution, the priest shows the consecrated bread and wine to the assembly. This gesture is called an “elevation”, for obvious reasons. The consecrated elements, the bread and wine that have become the body and blood of Christ, are raised up for all to see.

The elevation of the consecrated bread began in thirteenth century Paris in an effort to bolster belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Heresies expressing the contrary were flourishing at the time. Also, the practice of regular reception of communion had diminished, replaced by what was called “ocular communion”, where the faithful took satisfaction in simply seeing the consecrated bread.

The elevation had to be high when the elevation first appeared in the Mass because the priest, standing with his back to the people, had to raise the elements high enough to be seen. There is no instruction on how high, or how long, the priest is to raise the consecrated elements.

Because Eucharistic devotion at the time focused on the body of Christ in the consecrated bread rather than on the cup, the elevation of the cup was not added until almost 200 years later. The elevation gained universal acceptance in the Missal of Pius V in 1570. After the elevation, the priest genuflects or makes a profound bow as a sign of adoration.

Because they are already kneeling, there is no extra instruction for what the assembly is to do during the consecration or elevation. However, because the presider is instructed to show them the sacred elements, the obvious conclusion is that they should watch. The General Instruction does say that anyone who is standing at this time (in our case, a choir member or an usher) “ought to make a profound bow when the priest genuflects after the consecration”. (GIRM #43) A “profound bow” is defined as a bow of the body, as opposed to a “simple bow”, or bow of the head. (GIRM # 275)

Memorial Acclamation

For the first few centuries, the entire Eucharistic Prayer was seen as consecratory, as the church was not concerned with the exact point at which the bread and wine were transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. It was St. Ambrose in the 4th century that began to stress the words of institution. The Eastern church, which was more concerned with defending the divinity of the Holy Spirit, placed the emphasis on the action of the Spirit in sanctifying the offering. Surprisingly, these differences did not cause difficulties until the Middle Ages, when theologians tried to pinpoint when and how consecration occurred.

Recent theological reflection calls attention to the unified character of the Eucharistic Prayer, and how both gifts and people are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Roman Rite's New Order of the Mass (1969) adopted a custom from the Eastern church, where the words of institution are followed by the entire assembly acclaiming this great mystery of our faith. In the East, people sing "Amen" after each formula of institution. We sing an acclamation of the Paschal Mystery—the mystery of Christ's dying, rising, and being present among us.

The most familiar of these acclamations is also the most succinct: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." The second option, "Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory!", is very similar, because it is a translation of the same Latin text. While the first acclamation is **about** Christ, this second version is addressed **to** Christ, which makes it more faithful to early tradition and is more in line with the other acclamations. The third option echoes almost word for word 1 Cor 11: 26—"When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come again." Option four, "Lord by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free. You are the Savior of the world.", is the only one of the four that does not mention the final coming of Christ.

I love the description of why we sing this Memorial Acclamation from "Music in Catholic Worship": "We support one another's faith in the Paschal Mystery, the central mystery of our belief." (MCW 57) This is why we must sing this acclamation with full voice! Support your faith!

Anamnesis

What a word to remember!

And that's exactly the point: "*Anamnesis*" is a Greek word that means "memory", but not the same way that we think about a memory. We tend to look at memory as recalling something that happened in the past. "*Anamnesis*" is understood as remembering in such a way that the event of the past is actually made present once again.

It's a tough concept to grasp: re-actualizing for today something that occurred in the past. Our Jewish brothers and sisters understand this in their celebration of the Seder meal at Passover. As part of that celebration, a child will ask the question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The answer is the retelling of the story of how God freed Moses and the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In the telling, the event becomes real again and all are reminded of the covenant God made with them. God's past deeds become present again and accomplish their effects for all who share the current Passover meal.

Our *Anamnesis* is our remembering, our making present, God's saving deeds in Christ so that the fullness and power of those deeds of the past - his life, death, resurrection and ascension - take effect in our lives here and now. It is with this understanding that we recall Christ's command, "Do this in memory of me."

Each of our Eucharist Prayers draws out the implications of that command in context of the Paschal Mystery, proclaimed in the Memorial Acclamation. The Roman Canon (Prayer 1) says "Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ your Son. We your people and your ministers recall his passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory." The other prayers name other aspects of the mystery of salvation and promise of Christ's coming in glory. In each prayer, the language of the Anamnesis links this memorial to our offering.

Thus, our prayer, voiced by the priest, makes a living memory of Christ's saving deeds. A connection is made between the past and the present. Those events become real again, and we too are reminded that in Christ, God is faithful to his covenant with us. And by keeping our focus on Christ's coming in glory, you might say that *Anamnesis* is a way of remembering into the future!

Offering Ourselves

When I hear people talk about the Eucharistic Prayer at mass as "Father's prayer", I wonder what **they** are doing at the same time. The Eucharistic Prayer is "**our** prayer"; the priest gives voice to this prayer, but he is offering it on behalf of all of us.

We've looked at how this prayer has an overall theme of praise and thanksgiving, but it has one more characteristic - as a statement of offering. Emphasis on the offering and accepting of gifts stands out in every Eucharistic Prayer. Before the Institution Narrative, or "consecration", there are numerous requests that God accept, bless, and approve our offering and our gifts.

But what exactly is being offered? We automatically think of the elements of bread and wine consecrated as the Body and Blood of Christ. But that's not all being offered! According to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal:

"The Church's intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learn to offer themselves, and so day by day to be consummated, through Christ the Mediator, into unity with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all." (GIRM 79f)

It is interesting to note that this paragraph of the GIRM is quoting almost word for word from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first document of Vatican II:

"by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all." (CSL 48)

We do not offer Christ alone, we offer ourselves, our lives, our individual efforts to grow more like Christ and our collective efforts as a community of believers to serve each other as Christ once served. Most wonderful of all, although our offering contains our human imperfections, joined with the offering of Christ, it becomes a perfect offering of praise and thanksgiving to the Father.

And so, during the Eucharistic Prayer, we have more to do than become mere spectators. We join our prayer to the voice of the priest, and pray that “we who are nourished by his Body and Blood may be filled with the Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ.” (Eucharistic Prayer 3)

Intercessions in the Eucharistic Prayer

We could look at our Sunday ritual of celebrating the Mass as a series of prayers and actions that either *remember* or *intercede*. Sometimes, simultaneously.

We remember the stories of our ancestors in faith when we proclaim again the Scriptures; we remember the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper and the prayers he prayed over the bread and the cup; and we remember those who have died, at two particular points of every Eucharistic liturgy.

The first comes during the General Intercessions, or “Prayers of the faithful”, which contain a prayer for those who have died, and those who mourn their passing. The second comes during the Eucharistic Prayer, when we include another set of intercession prayers. In this second instance, the prayer for the dead also asks that we the living may one day join them in communion with all the saints. Often, names of saints are invoked, specifically Mary, and in the case of the first Eucharistic Prayer (the Roman Canon), a litany of saints is proclaimed, not once but twice!

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal tells us that through these intercessions, “the Eucharist is celebrated with the entire Church, of heaven as well as of earth, and that the offering is made for her and for all her members, living and dead, who have been called to participate in the redemption and the salvation purchased by Christ’s Body and Blood.” (GIRM 79g)

Since the Eucharistic Prayer is based on the Jewish blessing prayer, it is quite natural that it contain elements of petition. The early Christians thought of themselves as joined to Christ who “forever lives to make intercession.” (Heb 7: 25)

These intercessory prayers were added after the main structure of our Eucharistic Prayer was in place. They appeared at different times in the prayer, depending on the local community. For example, at Alexandria, they appeared before the institution narrative (“consecration”). The prayers composed following Vatican II retain the form followed at Antioch, where the intercessions came toward the end of the prayer.

They all include prayers for our church leaders, including the Pope and our Bishop. We pray for ourselves too, that our lives be joined to the offering on the altar, sanctified for what Lawrence Johnson calls “the pledge of future glory” promised by the Eucharist itself. (from “The Mystery of Faith” by Lawrence Johnson, published by the FDLC, 1994 revised edition)

Final Doxology - Amen

You can brag to all your friends that you speak Hebrew. You speak Hebrew several times at mass each week. Your vocabulary may be limited to a few words, but those words are loaded with meaning!

Whether you sing out **Alleluia** (“praise God”) before the Gospel - or answer **Amen** (“so be it”) to a prayer, you join your voice to those of our ancestors in faith who have used these Hebrew words in worship.

As we conclude our look at the Eucharistic Prayer, it is fitting to consider the word that concludes our great prayer of thanksgiving. It is not just any word: we even refer to it as the “Great Amen”.

Just as the Eucharistic Prayer began with a strong statement of praise, the Sanctus (Holy Holy Holy...), the prayer ends with another statement of praise, called the Doxology. The priest, speaking for all of us, elevates the consecrated species and gives glory to God the Father: *“through Him (Christ), with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever.”*

And we, who have made our own offering through, with and in Christ, respond with what the U.S. Bishops call “the most important acclamation of the mass, the great AMEN by which we profess the action of Christ to be our action as well.” (“The Eucharistic Prayer” from the BCL)

Singing our “Amen” allows us to put greater emphasis on the acclamation. There is more power to the statement, ensuring that it is a dynamic affirmation that we believe all that has been voiced in the Eucharistic Prayer. Many of our musical arrangements follow the tradition started in the Eastern church, often doubling or tripling the Amen for greater impact.

The gesture of elevating the consecrated bread and cup has been handed down from ancient papal liturgies. The elevation lasted through the entire doxology and the Amen. In the Middle Ages, various signs of the cross and other gestures shortened the duration of the elevation. The reforms following Vatican II restored this gesture of offering.

The elevation by the priest and deacon of the bread and the cup is the offering of the whole body and blood of Christ. We add the offering of our whole lives as well. Thus, the doxology statement summarizes what the Eucharistic Prayer is all about - the offering of our sacrifice joined with Christ’s sacrifice.

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