

Believe Celebrate Live THE EUCHARIST

Giving Thanks

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 moneychangers 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 not only our tastes, habits, and hobbies, but 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 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.

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.

Following the dialogue comes a preface prayer, which is "a poem . . . the song of the world discovering its salvation" (Philippe Béguerie, quoted in 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. Nearly ninety of them 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 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!

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). As Father Deiss observes, at this moment the liturgy looks to the cosmos. The perspective 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

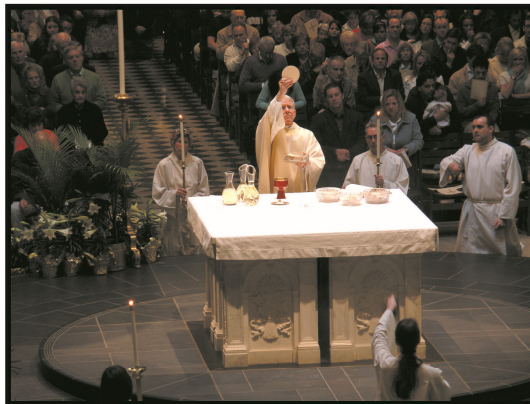
light-years, interested in our Eucharist? The liturgy answers: Yes, for Christ is the firstborn of creation” (Deiss, p. 72).

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).

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, *The Mystery*



and Meaning of the Mass, 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.

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).

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 presence becomes present to us. 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.

After holding up the bread and then the cup for all to see, the priest genuflects and all bow in a sign of adoration. It is a sign of the change that takes place during this prayer. The simple signs—bread and wine—become the Body and Blood of Christ. And so we sing “Amen!”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- The word *eucharist* means “thanksgiving.” For what do I give thanks today?
- What are my gifts? Do I share my time, my money, myself, with the parish community? Or do I feel that I don’t have anything to offer?
- How do I actively participate in the Eucharistic Prayer? What part of the prayer affects me most while praying and listening to the Eucharistic Prayer?