



Understanding the Mass

Part 4

The Eucharistic Prayer

Lift Up Your Hearts

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a dialogue which describes the action to come—it is right and just that we should lift up our hearts to Lord and give thanks. The word Eucharist is derived from the Greek, meaning “to give thanks”. The series of prayers that follow this dialogue are central to the action of the Mass, but are all too often “missed” by those gathered whose minds tend to drift as the priest prays.

Hutzpah!

Before looking at the parts of the Eucharistic Prayer, it is important to know that they are derived from the traditional Jewish table prayers recited at the Passover and at the weekly Sabbath meal. The Jewish people prayed with attitude—with hutzpah. They praised God for his actions throughout history beginning with Creation and concluding with the present day. They thanked God for redeeming them through Exodus and with firm faith and hutzpah they would ask (petition) God to do it all over again for them today!

The Preface

At Mass the *Preface*, which is specific to the particular celebration (the liturgical season or feast) narrates the great saving deeds of God through our history which includes what he has done for the Jewish people. It reminds us that Jesus is our Exodus—that in and through him, his life, death and resurrection, and his sending the Holy Spirit (the Paschal Mystery) we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven. Catholics should listen to these words and with hutzpah ask God to once again, here and now—

today realize our redemption by our participation in these sacred mysteries.

The Sanctus

This song of the angels found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah recounts the prophet’s vision of God’s throne located in the Temple. Isaiah saw—the glory of God represented by the train of his garment and a cloud of incense filling the Temple—all of heaven and earth—every nook and cranny. To this is added, from Saint Matthew’s Gospel, the words shouted at Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—*hosanna in the highest*. “Hosanna” is an expression of praise and rejoicing addressed to the one who saves. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* reminds us that the Son of God deigned to descend from the glory of heaven; that he entered into the Holy City of Jerusalem to suffer and die for us; and that in this Eucharist, he comes under the form of bread and wine to save us today.

It is with hutzpah that we should sing this hymn, our response to the *Preface*, and recount the great love that God has for us in sending his son redeem us.

Kneeling

The bishops of the United States requested and received an indult from the Holy See that has the faithful kneel from the end of the *Sanctus* until the *Great Doxology*. This change in position reminds us that we come humbly before God as we silently join the priest in prayer—attentively listening to the words of the *Eucharistic Prayer*. In doing so, the sacred actions at the altar also transform the hearts of the faithful gathered uniting them as the Body of Christ.

The First Epiclesis (Ehp—eh—clee—sis)

The words prayed by the priest after the *Sanctus* acknowledge the trinitarian nature of God who is indeed holy. It is God who gives life and holiness to us and who gathers us from the corners of the world inviting us to make a continuous sacrifice *from the rising of the son to its setting*.

Then extending his hands over the bread and wine, the priest calls down the Holy Spirit by whose power these gifts (and us) will be transformed—a divine, not a human, action.



The Institution Narrative

Faithful to the Lord's command at the Last Supper, "Do this in memory of me," the Eucharistic Prayer continues with the priest narrating, in word and ritual, what Jesus did on the night before he suffered. The telling of this story *and* the work of the Holy Spirit *consecrates* the bread and wine which become the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Part of the ritual action has the priest elevate the Body of Christ (Host) and the Blood of Christ (Chalice). This dates back to the medieval Church when the faithful rarely received Holy Communion and therefore at least wanted to see the Host and Chalice. The priest then reverently genuflects in humble adoration and while not required, bells are often rung at this moment to add solemnity and to call the faithful's attention to this moment. In the past, the church's main tower bell would also be rung so that the faithful outside could pause for a moment of silent adoration.

The Anamnesis (A-nahm-knee-sis)

The *Memorial Acclamation* is a response made by the faithful to what has just happened at the consecration. Anamnesis is a fancy Greek word that simply means "remembrance". This moment of remembering, however, has a triple significance. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, "The Eucharist (i) looks to the past, commemorating the passion of Christ... (2) it looks to the present, signifying the unity of the Church...and (iii) it looks to the future, prefiguring our enjoyment with God in heaven (Summa IIIa 73.4).

The Offering and Second Epiiclesis

As the Eucharistic Prayer continues, the Body and Blood are offered to God—these gifts given to us and representing us—help us to learn to offer ourselves by joining our lives to Christ's. He emptied himself for our salvation and calls us to similarly pour out our lives for others. Again, the priest calls down the Holy Spirit to form us into the Church—"grant that we, who are nourished with the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with the Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ."

The Intercessions

Again, like the prayers offered by the Jewish people at Passover and Sabbath table, the Eucharistic Prayer contains specific petitions for the Church, the Pope, the bishops, for the members of the Church, for the dead, and for our future joining with Christ and the communion of saints in eternal glory.

The Great Doxology

Elevating the Host and Chalice, the priest says or sings a hymn that sums up what has just happened in the Eucharistic Prayer. We have recounted God's great love for us in redeeming us through his Son and sending the Holy Spirit to make us into his holy people. It is a recognition that everything we have is graciously given to us by our loving God. Our response in one word is profound—"Amen"—a word that means "I believe." *All glory and honor are yours, for ever and ever.*

About the Eucharistic Prayers

The Church in the United States has ten different Eucharistic Prayers to choose from. However, most often we hear one of the four traditional prayers.

Eucharistic Prayer I is called the Roman Canon and was exclusively used from the time of the Council of Trent (mid-16th C) until the Second Vatican Council—it is rooted in the tradition of the ancient Church at Alexandria in Egypt.

Eucharistic Prayer II (most people's favorite since it is the shortest) is attributed to a 3rd C Roman priest named Hippolytus...but has its roots in the tradition of the ancient Church at Antioch in Turkey.

Eucharistic Prayers III and IV were composed during and after the Second Vatican Council but are likewise patterned after the prayers found in Antioch in Turkey. Eucharistic Prayer IV is unique because it comes with its own *Preface* meaning that its use is restricted to Ordinary Time on days not commemorating a saint or feast.

Other Eucharistic Prayers were also composed in the years after the Second Vatican Council—including those for Masses with Children; Masses of Reconciliation; and others adopted from other countries and focused on other needs.

