

The Liturgy of the Eucharist Part One  
03/26/17

As I was putting together my thoughts for this weekend and thinking ahead to next weekend, I realized there is a lot of information to pass along when it comes to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In my column, I have covered the preparation of the altar, which brings us to the Eucharistic Prayer and what follows, up to and including the prayer after communion. So let me talk about just the Eucharistic Prayer.

We begin with the Preface. Mike Aquilina tells us the Preface is a prayer of praise that comes before the main Eucharistic Prayer and introduces the “Holy, Holy, Holy.” It reminds us of all the reasons we have to praise God. And believe it or not, there are 50, yes 50, different Prefaces. Some are specific to seasons, like the two for Advent, the three for Christmas, the four for Lent, the two for the Passion, the five for Easter and so on.

There are prefaces for Mary, Apostles, Saints, and Martyrs. Then there’s the eight options for the Sundays in Ordinary Time and the six common Prefaces for weekdays in Ordinary Time and the five for Masses for the dead. So, you see, in most cases, there are lots of choices. And these choices don’t include the ones that are part of a specific Eucharistic Prayer.

For instance, Eucharistic Prayer One, often called The Roman Canon, does not have a unique preface, nor does Eucharistic Prayer Three. But Eucharistic Prayer Two has its own, as does Eucharistic Prayer Four. In fact, I was taught in seminary that Prayer Four must always include its Preface, since the entire Prayer is a summary of the history of salvation.

There are two Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation – we use Prayer One during Advent and Prayer Two during Lent. There are four Prayers for various needs. I use the first Prayer for various needs when I am trying to get across a message of unity, because the words of the Prayer capture the essence of what is needed to walk that path to unity. Finally, there are three Eucharistic Prayers for Children.

The climax of the Eucharistic Prayer, no matter which one is used, is the institution narrative, where we are told the story of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. It includes the words Jesus spoke when He gave the disciples His body and Blood. The narrative comes from Scripture, but isn't directly from any one book of the New Testament. Because there are so many varieties of the Prayer, the narrative is not the same at every Mass. The story is always the same but it may be told in more elaborate or abbreviated ways.

Now, I'm going to introduce you to some very big words: Epiclesis, Transubstantiation, and Anamnesis. You don't hear them very often, because they are pretty complex. And yet, they are really pretty simple when you know what they mean. Michael Dubruiel provides some good explanations.

Epiclesis is the point when the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine, praying to God to send the Holy Spirit down upon these simple items we offer from God's creation. Transubstantiation refers to the mystery of what has taken place. Though the outward signs of the bread and wine remain, we believe that the whole substance of both has been changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Finally, Anamnesis recalls God's saving work throughout history that culminates in the Passion and Resurrection and awaits His return in glory. The word actually means to remember and so this retelling makes present this great mystery and our need to offer God Thanksgiving and praise for all He has done and continues to do.

The Eucharistic Prayer ends with the Great Amen. You may be asking yourselves what's so great about this Amen versus all the other Amens we say during Mass. Well, Dubruiel reminds us that with this particular Amen, we are assenting to the prayer, the Eucharistic Prayer, which has literally brought Christ into our midst. Let me finish today with a word about gluten.

The Church has authorized the use of low-gluten hosts for those who are gluten intolerant. Notice I said low-gluten and not gluten-free. In order for the bread to be wheat, there has to be at least some gluten. Thus, hosts with very low gluten are okay. Next week we'll finish our journey with the end of the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Concluding Rites.