

Understanding the Mass – The Eucharistic Prayers

After the singing of the Sanctus we enter into the heart of the Liturgy of the Eucharist with the Eucharistic prayers.

There are various options of the Eucharistic prayers that can be used in Mass. We sometimes use Eucharistic Prayer I which is known as the Roman Canon. It mentions the apostles and early martyrs and is used on Sundays and special occasions. We are very familiar with Eucharistic Prayer II which source is the *Apostolic Tradition*. It was probably the first of the prayers to be recorded and is the shortest. It is often used on weekdays. Eucharistic Prayer III more elegant in its wording, having its origins in France. It is generally used on Sundays and for funerals. We occasionally use Eucharistic Prayer IV. It received its inspiration from the eastern traditions of the Church and gives a full summary of salvation history. Besides these four there are also two for Masses of Reconciliation and four others for Masses of various needs.

When we begin the Eucharistic Prayers we have liturgically entered the holy of holies. Since we are on such holy ground, all kneel in a posture of reverence and adoration. The priest, however, remains standing, signifying that he is praying as Christ, as the head of his Body, on our behalf.

While the words used in each of the Eucharistic Prayers varies somewhat, the basic elements of the prayers remain the same. After some initial prayer the priest stretches his hands over the gifts on the altar and asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the gifts to make them holy. This prayer is known as the *epiclesis* or “calling down”. There are parallels to this action in the other Sacraments such as when the bishop calls down the Holy Spirit on those to be confirmed. We also see this in scripture, most notably when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Virgin Mary and she conceived our Incarnate Lord. Just as it happened with the Blessed Virgin, just so does the Holy Spirit now come down upon the gifts to transform them into the Body and Blood of Jesus. A server rings the bells to capture everyone’s attention in order that we may all focus on this great moment on the altar,

The Institution Narrative and Consecration follow. Through the priest we hear the voice of Jesus speaking those same words which he said during his Last Supper discourse inaugurating the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The bells are again rung as the greatest miracle on earth is taking place before us as our simple gifts of bread and wine are being transformed, truly and substantially, into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

We then proclaim the Mystery of Faith. There are three options to be used, each one a concise statement that summarizes all of salvation history. The Mystery of Faith is followed by memorial prayers, recalling the Lord’s death, resurrection and ascension in fulfillment of his commandment to “do this in memory of me”. Through this sacramental recalling, we do not just remember those great events of long past but we enter mystically into the moment of the Last Supper and Calvary, making present the saving action of

Christ when he offered the sacrifice of his life to the Father as a holy oblation. We are not to be spectators at this time but through these prayers we are to be actual participants with our Lord as we too are to offer ourselves to the Father with Christ as living sacrifices.

Next in the prayers we intercede for all the members of the Church that we may be brought together in communion through this one liturgy. We pray for the Pope, our bishop and all the faithful. We also ask the Lord to remember those who have died that we may all enter into eternal life with Mary and all the saints thereby drawing together and making one those in heaven, in Purgatory and those on earth with Jesus Christ, the head of the Body.

The Eucharistic prayers are then concluded with the Doxology. This Trinitarian declaration brings together all of our prayers for the great glory of God. We then assent to all that has been said and done by our great “*Amen*”. In Hebrew *Amen* means “*So be it*”. By saying it we ratify all our words and actions, and thus our entire lives, in this living and eternal sacrifice to our God.