

Understanding the Mass – The Preface and Sanctus

Once the gifts are prepared on the altar the priest invites us to stand to pray in thanksgiving for what the Lord has done and what he is going to do. We stand in a posture of readiness as we are being invited to enter more deeply into the mysteries of the Mass.

The priest says “*Pray...that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father*”. While the gifts are “*ours*,” as we currently say, using the words “*my sacrifice and yours*” brings out the reality more clearly that Jesus is offering the sacrifice of his very life to the Father and we are joining our sacrifices with his upon the altar.

Next we begin the Eucharistic prayers with Preface. The Preface is a dialogue and hymn of thanksgiving that lifts us into a new level in the Mass – into the mysteries of Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary for our salvation. The dialogue begins with the familiar “*The Lord be with you*” followed by our response – “*and with you spirit*”. We are then called to “*lift up our hearts*,” an invitation to give ourselves more fully to the Lord, to lay aside all cares of this world and focus our minds, wills and emotions on the great actions before us on the altar. Next we acknowledge that it is “*right and just*” to give him praise. After this dialogue, the priest begins the hymn of thanksgiving, speaking for the whole Church through Christ, as he gives thanks to the Father for his plan of salvation worked out on our behalf. There are various options for this prayer depending on the season and the choice of the priest. The prayer concludes by asking all the angels and saints to join us in praising the wonders of God.

With all the heavenly hosts we next sing the *Sanctus*: “*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts...*” These words echo the prophet Isaiah’s praise of God as he entered the sanctuary of the Lord and the words of the angels heard before the throne of God in the book of Revelation. In the Sanctus we also repeat the words proclaimed to Jesus as he made his triumphful entry in Jerusalem crying out “*Hosanna in the highest*”.

Unfortunately, during the singing of the Sanctus, our physical eyes do not allow us to see the church filled with angels praising God – and the glory of the Lord flowing from the altar. However, throughout the Mass, we can experience some of the power and glory of God through our physical senses. In the liturgy we hear words that are powerful and simple chants and melodies can move our hearts deeper into worship. We smell incense reminding us of the powerful mystery of our prayers and the presence of God among us. We feel the holy water reminding us of God’s gifts to us at baptism. In the Eucharist we taste real food and drink as we partake of the Lord’s sacrifice. We see candles burning signifying Christ’s light among us, stained glass windows which give us a glimpse of the brilliant colors of heaven, statues and pictures remind us that we are in the company of the angels and saints and we see the Cross witnessing to God’s great love for us. The pews are set in a way that direct everyone’s attention to the altar and the tabernacle gleams to reveal the powerful presence within it. Even the high ceilings of the church are meant to help us envision the transcendent nature of God whose presence we have entered.

All our senses are engaged as everything around us is used to help us experience the glory of God in the Mass, giving us a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy. As we end the Sanctus, we

recognize that we can no longer stand before the thrice-holy God and we fall to our knees in worship.