

The Mass (Part XXI)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

From the point at which we left off last time, there are a few final preparations before the Eucharistic Prayer. After the bread and wine have been offered, the priest says two prayers for purification. These are said inaudibly, as private prayers. First, after the cup is elevated he says: “Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts.” If incense is used here, the second prayer is delayed. Both the gifts on the altar, the priest and all the people are incensed. Here the censuring is a sign both of our desire for purification and as a symbol of our offering of ourselves, along with the offering of Jesus to the Father. Then the priest washes his hands as a sign of his acknowledgement that he is unworthy because of his sins to offer the sacrifice of the Mass. With this he says the “secret” or inaudible prayer: “Lord, wash away my sin of iniquity; Cleanse me from my sin.”

Again, all these preparations need to be seen as actions and prayers that are part of the Eucharistic Prayer. Nonetheless, once these specific preparations are made, the priest turns to the people to begin what is certainly the central and most important part of the Mass. As a matter of local custom (although there is ancient precedent) we state the intention for the Mass. In case this is unfamiliar, parishes have some sort of procedure in place so that parishioners can make arrangements for a particular Mass to be offered for a special need. This usually involves applying the Mass to assist someone who has died, helping them advance toward the Kingdom of God. It may involve some other need, such as healing or a private intention. This is a very common practice in the church today, and the manner of caring for this preserving the propriety of the practice is carefully outlined in the Code of Canon Law. There is no particular place in which the intention must be stated publicly, but again according to ancient practice, stating it just after the priest washes his hands seems a good idea. An offering is typically made for the intention at the Mass, and is usually a small stipend for the priest. This is a small way that we can join our own sacrifice to the sacrifice of Jesus in the Mass.

The priest then says one prayer, over the gifts. “Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father. The people respond: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his Church.” Then a prayer prescribed for the particular day of the celebration is said. Although much shorter, it is similar to the opening prayer of the Mass, in that it sums up the celebration. Here is the prayer for Christmas, as an example: “Lord, accept our gifts on this joyful feast of our salvation. By our communion with God made man, may we become more like him who joins our lives to yours, for he is Lord for ever and ever.”

While today the most common name for the prayer that follows is the Eucharistic Prayer, one very old name is the “Canon” of the Mass. It is a name that is still occasionally used. It comes from the name for a builder’s measuring rod, which in ancient times consisted of a rod with a vertical plumb line. It was used to determine that a wall was square or plumb. Its use as a name for this prayer

seems to indicate that this is the standard by which all else is measured. It is less commonly known as the “anaphora” from the Greek that means “to offer,” or lift up.

The Eucharistic Prayer follows a particular pattern. There are four different prayers in our current sacramentary and several dozen can be found throughout the history of the liturgy. For the main part, they all follow a particular pattern. Although we cannot examine each prayer in detail, we will use Eucharistic Prayer II as the outline.

The “dialogue” begins the Eucharistic Prayer, and is found throughout the Mass at points of greater importance (such as the announcement of the Gospel). “The Lord be with you. And also with you.” is from the earliest days of the church added to by the phrase: “Lift up your hearts.” It expresses an Old Testament idea, echoed by St. Paul: “Seek the things that are above ...” (Colossians 3:1-2) This dialogue is intended to announce the action that follows, to clear our mind, and make us ready to do what the Church does. We give thanks to the Lord.