

The Mass (Part XXIII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE CONSECRATION

One more comment about the epiclesis, with a few reminders of things already covered. There are currently four Eucharistic prayers in use in the Catholic Church today. When you look at them carefully, all but the first have a very clear prayer, asking that God the Holy Spirit come upon the gifts of bread and wine. With this, there is a return to a very ancient practice in the church of establishing a relationship between the action of the Holy Spirit and the consecration of the bread and wine. Occasionally, the question is asked when exactly in the Mass does the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. Or we could ask the same question by asking what are the essential words that “make” it happen. In the past, the emphasis has been on the words of institution, the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper. Now, both the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the words of institution are emphasized as the essential ingredients.

You may notice an unusual gesture of the priest during the words praying for the Holy Spirit to come. He holds his hands over the gifts with his palms down. It is reminiscent of many scenes in the Scriptures where a prophet or an apostle lays his hands on a person in preparation for their receiving God’s grace. Although the priest does not touch the offering at this point, it is a sign that upon these gifts God’s Spirit will descend.

These matters are important in understanding the nature of the church and the Mass. We need to first add the words of institution. They are almost identical in all of the Eucharistic Prayers.

Before he was given up to death, a death he freely accepted, he took bread and gave you thanks. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and eat it: This is my body which will be given up for you.

When the supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.

These are the words recorded in the Gospels (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20; see also John 6) and St. Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

The relationship between the Mass and the Lord’s words and actions at the Last Supper is essential. The key in this relationship is the command “Do this in memory of me.” The “this” referred to here is the action of duplicating Jesus’ four actions of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing. As he did this, we are to do. But we should not overlook that both the Last Supper and the offering of the Mass by the Church is directly related also to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross: “*This is my body which will*

be given up for you." "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you"

The earliest understanding of the effect and meaning of the Mass was that the consecration of the bread and wine applied the effects of Jesus' sacrificial death to us. By doing this in remembrance of Christ, the Church was bringing about the forgiveness of sins, the reconciliation of humanity.

The bread which you can see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That cup, or rather what the cup contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. It was by means of these things that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. (St. Augustine, Sermon 227)

This is a more complete explanation of the Mass than might be apparent at first glance. It answers the question of "what". It is the Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ. And, it answers the question of its purpose, the "why": so that the Lord would present his Body and Blood to us, for our forgiveness.