

THE MASS (PART XXIV)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE CONSECRATION CONTINUED

During the Eucharistic Prayer, there are a variety of gestures that are important. The first is the sign of the cross over the elements of bread and wine as the priest invokes the Holy Spirit:

Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them Holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In the past, the number of times that the sign of the cross was made during the Mass was so greatly multiplied that there was no distinction in terms of their meaning. This singular gesture stands out as both an act of blessing (to make the gifts ready) and as designation that these elements are the concern of this prayer.

In addition, at the end of the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper (the words of institution and consecration) the priest elevates the chalice for all to see. The origin of this gesture is during a time in the Church's history when infrequent communion was the norm. This was the result of an overemphasis on the unworthiness of the individual. The desire of the people could only be fulfilled in their being able to see the Body and Blood of Christ. The elevation was accompanied with the ringing of a bell to remind the faithful that their meager opportunity to participate in the Mass had arrived. The elevation (and the bells) is still a part of the Mass but their significance has probably changed slightly. There is still value in looking upon the Body and Blood of Jesus. It is an opportunity within the Mass to adore Christ's presence among us even if it may be an anticipation of our receiving communion. For those who cannot for some reason receive communion this can be a high point in the Mass.

Finally, to the posture of the people further signifies the solemnity of the moment of consecration. Only the priest presiding (or concelebrants) stands for the Eucharistic Prayer. While standing has developed into a more important posture of prayer, the act of kneeling in humility and as a recognition of the solemn character of the consecration has been retained even in the modernized liturgy. To join the people, the priest genuflects after the elevation of the host and the chalice.

Inserted into the Eucharistic Prayer is a memorial acclamation. While this is an unusual addition to the Western liturgy, it is common in those from other parts of the world. It is a way that people can respond to the most solemn center of the Mass.

While other prayers have been mixed into the Eucharistic prayer, there are three that are considered of great importance. We have mentioned two, the epiclesis or invocation of the Holy Spirit to descend upon the bread and wine and the words of institution. The final important piece is what is called the anamnesis, the act of remembering. At the end of the words spoken by the priest over the cup, he says

“Do this in memory of me.” Of course, the offering of the Mass is the Church’s response to this command. The language of the prayer is, perhaps, not strong enough to allow us to see the full meaning of this offering.

Among the Jews, during and before the time of Jesus, the understanding of the participation in the Passover meal was that as a family or group gathered and participated in the ritual of the Passover, they were incorporated into its benefits. The Passover meal, first done in Egypt, saved the people from the destroying angel of the final plague. They were identified as God’s people and, therefore, were recipients of the promises God made to them, to protect them, be present with them, to hear their prayers and guide them to the Promised Land. As a Jew, even in the time of Jesus, recalled the events of Hebrew history he was incorporated into its saving meaning. This is what “anamnesis” is all about. It is presenting an event of the past so that it is as if it is taking place now. Jesus could have said “Do this to bring me back again. Do this to become part of the saving victory of the Cross.”

Therefore, after the people’s acclamation, the priest continues:

In memory of his death and resurrection, we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup.

The offering to the Father that Jesus made on the Cross is made again by the Church. This is in obedience to his command: *“Do this in memory of me.”*