

## **Gathering Means Something**

For moviegoers, “being together” isn’t necessary for enjoying the show. People enter, find seats, watch previews, eat popcorn, chat with friends, and wait for the movie to begin. This sense of separateness sometimes disappears if the whole group responds to the action together. Shared laughter, shared surprise, shared fear change the air and transform an audience into a fleeting community.

Once upon a time, going to church was similar to entering a theater. People entered silently and prayed privately. Once Mass began, the priest on his “stage” did all the important things himself. The communion procession included everyone, but very little else really helped worshipers to feel any community togetherness. The liturgical reforms of the 1960s tried to change all this.

When the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist, *experiencing* community is central to its meaning. We are encouraged to greet one another and especially to welcome and assist guests. The Introductory Rites themselves are designed to form us into a community, and many other parts of the liturgy help us to retain that sense of connectedness. During the opening procession, the dialogue with the presider, the expression of repentance, the sung Glory to God, and the opening prayer we constantly interact with various ministers and with one another. We sing, respond to our leader, sign ourselves with the cross, and pray both silently and aloud. All these elements of the Introductory Rites help focus our attention and prepare us to participate in the mystery to be celebrated. They also help us to set aside our private concerns and to become “one flock led by one Shepherd” who takes us to green pastures and feeds us from the twin tables of Word and Sacrament. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, the community gathers “so that it may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves” (CSL #48). When we experience ourselves as a community, we become able to achieve this goal.

## **The Opening Procession**

Anyone who has ever watched the opening of the Olympics recognizes that it is strictly choreographed. At the beginning, the head of the Olympic Committee always receives the host country’s head of state. At the end, the host country’s national anthem is always sung. In between, the traditional “opening rites” are always beautiful, entertaining, impressive, and somehow moving. Perhaps most moving is the procession of the athletes with their national flags. The human heart recognizes in these rites an archetypal longing to “gather the nations” in peace and harmony before the competition begins.

All processions, even secular ones, are symbolic movement through time and space. They provide a formal beginning of whatever “work” we are about to do. Just so, in every Eucharist the procession of liturgical ministers into the midst of the gathered assembly is a kind of highway marker which says, “You (plural) are now leaving ordinary time and space and entering a sacred precinct where you (plural) and God will meet and share life together.”

Israel's journey from Egypt and marching through the desert to the Promised Land is the prototype of our liturgical processions. God led this first procession in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex 13:21-22). So we, in the opening procession of a Mass when *incense* is used, follow the fragrant cloud and are reminded of that sacred Presence which never leaves us. Next comes the *cross*, the sign of our salvation. *Candles* flank the cross to help us recall the Paschal Candle, that great Pillar of Fire we kindled at the Easter Vigil. Next come the ministers—the *lector*, the *deacon* carrying the Book of the Gospels, and finally the *presider*, who leads our community prayer as Jesus led His followers. All these ministers and the assembly sing some *song* which prepares us for the scriptures we will hear and the sacred meal we will share. Remembering that Jesus is among us, the procession forms us into a community gathered in His name (Mt 18:20) and ready to meet God.

### **The Opening Dialogue**

After the opening procession ascends the altar platform, the presider leads the community in the Sign of the Cross. This body prayer first given to us at Baptism identifies us as one with Christ. Romano Guardini, a German theologian and liturgist, advises: “When we cross our-selves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. . . Let us make a large, unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us. . . It is the holiest of signs” (*Sacred Signs*, St. Louis, 1956, p.13ff).

Next, priest and people begin the first of many dialogues—exchanges we hardly notice, since everyone knows them by heart. In fact the whole Mass is a continual “conversation” between assembly and ministers—greetings (“The Lord be with you”), calls to action (“Let us pray”), and acclamations (“The Word of the Lord”). This feature of Catholic liturgy helps us to achieve that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgy that the Council fathers sought. It also shows that the whole assembly, priest and people, do this sacred action together as the one Body of Christ.

The new edition of the Roman Missal will require us to learn some new words for these exchanges so that our responses come closer to the original Latin. For instance, one option for the presider's first greeting now reads, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is a direct quote from Romans 1:7 (and seven other Pauline letters!)\* Paul was using a typical opening greeting, the rough equivalent of, “Dear Romans, How are you? I am fine.” To us the language seems convoluted, and we would not use it in everyday English. However, we are restoring it—and the response, “And with your spirit,” (from the Latin, “*Et cum spiritu tuo*”)—in order to claim our Christian roots in scripture and tradition. These solemn ritual words remind us that this gathering is not like any other gathering. It is special.

\* I Cor 1:3, 2 Cor 1:2, Gal 1:3, Eph 1:2, Phil 1:2, 2 Thes 1:2, Philemon 3

### **Preparation for Our Shared Priestly Action**

Jesus continually scandalized Israel's religious leaders because He ate with sinners, cured sinners, and said outrageous things like, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mk 2:17). Jesus has not changed; and when we, His followers, come together for liturgy, we come as a community

of sinners saved by His passover from death to life. Because of this, acknowledging our sinfulness and asking to be freed and forgiven are appropriate during the Gathering Rites. As He did when He walked the earth, Jesus welcomes us, lifts us up from our sins, and invites us to share in the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Penitential acts at the beginning of the liturgy have a long history. Before the reforms of Vatican II, the opening rites included “I confess to almighty God,” an absolution, two silent prayers asking for release from sin and God’s forgiveness, and the “Lord have mercy” litany—all in Latin. This heavy emphasis on sin came from a kind of “ritual build-up.” All the various prayers originated at different times and places and were simply continued in Paul V’s Roman Missal of 1570.

The Sacramentary of Paul VI retained most of these expressions of repentance, but they were not to be used together. Since each one sets a different tone for the liturgy, parishes have often determined their use according to the liturgical season. The “I confess to almighty God. . .” is appropriate for Lent, the sprinkling rite in the Easter season, and various wordings of the “Lord have mercy” litany during Ordinary time. The third edition of the Roman Missal continues the practice of the Vatican II reform but translates the Latin to closely match the Latin *editio typica*. These three different “beginnings” help Christians become aware of ourselves as a sinful people who, nonetheless, are invited to share in the double feast of Word and Table with the Risen Lord who welcomes us.

### **Glory to God**

Christ was sent by the Father, to become truly flesh of our flesh and like us in all things but sin. Filled with awe that God would do this for us, we join in the ancient song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will” (Luke 2:14). These words are slightly changed from what we have been using—“Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth”—since they more closely approximate the Latin text.

A little history of the hymn, called from ancient times the “Angelic Hymn,” connects us to our Eastern Rite brothers and sisters. The *Gloria* was probably written in North Africa as a morning praise song perhaps as early as the 2nd century. Hilary, bishop of Poitiers in the mid-4th century, is said to have introduced it into the West. He would have discovered it during his banishment in Phrygia (modern-day Turkey), and possibly introduced it in Europe because of its clear acknowledgment of the Trinitarian mystery—co-equal Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At that time, this doctrinal position was then being challenged by Arian heretics.

In our day, as we join the choirs of angels in singing the glory and praise of God, we remember the great gift God has given to us in the Incarnation. Jesuit liturgist Fr. Joseph Jungmann beautifully says:

Every day that the Church lives, every time the Church gathers her children in prayer, and particularly when she assembles them for the Eucharist, a new light flashes across the world and the Church beholds, with mingled joy and longing, the approach of the Kingdom of God, the advent, in spite of every obstacle of the consummation of the great plan: that glory will come to God, and to [human beings] of God’s choice, peace and salvation (*Mass of the Roman Rite*, 1 volume edition, p. 235).

## The Opening Prayer

The Introductory Rites end with the Opening Prayer, or Collect, the first communal prayer of the day. Everything preceding this moment has prepared us for the Liturgy of the Word to follow. Finally, as sinners standing in God's presence and singing praise with the angels, we are invited to pray. The rubrics (ritual instructions in the missal) say:

And all pray in silence with the Priest for a moment.

Then the Priest, with hands extended, says the Collect prayer, at the end of which the people acclaim: Amen.

Each of these simple words constitutes a thread of meaning in that complex tissue of actions and words through which liturgy expresses our relationship to one another, to our world, and to God. First, we are *standing* throughout the Gathering Rites, almost as though the opening procession still continues in some way. (We also stand at other points in the liturgy, primarily when we are engaged in a communal priestly action.)

The *quiet time* allows everyone to settle into the silence and speak to God from the heart. Out of that silence the Priest *extends his hands*, a prayer gesture as old as Moses and David and our ancient Christian ancestors pictured in the catacombs. (See Ex 17:11-13 and Psalm 141:2.) Then he *collects* our many individual prayers in one single prayer suited to the liturgy of the day which is addressed to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Finally, we make this common prayer our own by saying a resounding "*Amen.*"

What are these threads of meaning? First, our shared posture shows that we stand together with our priestly leader to intercede for this world and offer ourselves in its service. Our communal silence opens us, as individuals and as a people, to listen to the movement of the Spirit among us. The open arms of the priest-president embrace us, God's people, and lift our prayer towards God. Our "Amen" is a cry of assent to all the silent and spoken prayer together. As a community, we are now prepared to hear God's Word.