

## Liturgy of the Eucharist:

### Structure and Meaning

Mark's Gospel, the first account of Jesus' ministry, tells how Jesus fed the hungry multitude:

*"Taking the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before the people." (Mk 6:41)*

In all four gospels this story, as well as the Eucharistic institution accounts, use these same four verbs in the same order. After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples continued taking, blessing, breaking, and giving believers bread and wine; and whenever they did so, they experienced the presence of the risen Lord (Luke 24:30-31). Our Liturgy of the Eucharist continues what they handed on.

Preparation of Gifts and Table: Jesus *took* people's ordinary bread. Our "taking" happens when the priest-presider takes our gifts – simple bread and festive wine representing our lives in all their dimensions – and places them on the altar.

Eucharistic Prayer: Jesus *blessed* God in the words of a prayer every Jew said at every meal: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth." Our "blessing" is the Eucharistic Prayer, in which we praise and thank God, remember Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, and offer the Father, with Jesus, the sacrifice of His life and ours.

Communion Rite: Jesus *broke* the bread the people offered. Every Jewish meal every day began with the breaking of bread. Our "breaking" happens when the assembly sings together to Jesus, the sacrificed Lamb of God, while the priest breaks the consecrated bread we are about to share.

Jesus *gave* the broken bread to His disciples. Our "giving" happens as the priest entrusts the sacred fragments to the other ministers, and all "give" them to the people as they come in procession to the altar.

These four actions recounted in the gospels and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23-26) have been repeated over and over through the centuries. They bind Christian believers into a holy communion with one another, with our Lord, and – through him – to the Holy Trinity.

### The Preparation of the Altar-Table and Gifts

The Liturgy of the Eucharist moves the center of attention from the readings and homily at the ambo to the actions and prayers around the altar table. An altar is not an ordinary piece of furniture. It is consecrated by a bishop, who anoints it with Holy Chrism, incenses it, covers it for the first time with a white cloth, and illuminates it with candles. Through these actions the altar becomes a symbol of Christ, the Anointed One, and a holy place radiating the aura of Christ's presence. (See *The Rites*, vol 2, "Dedication of an Altar" par. 22a.)

To this sacred altar we bring gifts which symbolize ourselves. Bread, the most basic food in every culture, is "the staff of life", representing what we need to remain alive. Wine, at the other end of the

food spectrum, is elegant, refined and festive, a symbol of living well. These gifts, both “fruit of the earth and work of human hands”, contain within them an immense ecology of human and divine interaction in this world. God’s good earth provides food and drink for us, and we bring these gifts to the altar as strong symbols of our lives. Besides the bread and wine, we also present “other gifts to relieve the needs of the Church and of the poor” (*Roman Missal*, par 22). These gifts, a collection of money and sometimes food items, represent our daily labor in yet another way.

All the gifts are taken in solemn procession to the altar. We, the faithful – already the Body of Christ gathered for worship and fed from the Table of the Word – symbolically present ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given to God and to one another in union with Christ, the great sacrificial Gift. The priest, one of us and yet representing Christ our Leader, receives our gifts, praises God for them, and sets them on the altar. In doing so he moves them from the everyday world into the realm of the sacred. This is the first step towards their transformation – and ours.

### **The Roots of the Eucharistic Prayer**

The Eucharistic Prayer is like a precious jewel set into an heirloom ring. The “jewel” is the story of the Last Supper:

*“... [Jesus] took bread and, giving thanks broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying: ‘Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body which will be given up for you.’*

*‘...Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood...’*

*‘Do this in memory of me.’*”

The “heirloom ring” is an ancient Jewish prayer said over a final cup of wine on feastdays:

- it begins with a *dialogue* calling everyone to thank and praise God;
- moves to *praise* – “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, eternal King, who feeds the whole world with your goodness, with grace, with loving-kindness and with tender mercy....”
- then moves on to *thanksgiving (eucharistia)* for God’s mighty deeds – “We thank you, O Lord our God, because you gave as a heritage to our ancestors a desirable, good and ample land, and because you brought us forth, O Lord our God, from the land of Egypt....”
- and ends with *intercession* – “Have mercy, O Lord our God, upon Israel, your people, upon Jerusalem, your city ...upon the kingdom of the house of David....”
- Jesus used this prayer form and handed it down to His followers (see 1 Cor 11:23-25).

This same basic structure undergirds all our Eucharistic prayers. After an opening *dialogue*, the priest *praises and thanks* the Father for Jesus’ mighty deeds, and all respond with the “Holy, Holy, Holy”. Then he calls the Spirit down upon the gifts and retells the story of Jesus’ words and deeds at the Last Supper. After inviting everyone to proclaim the mystery of faith, he offers Christ’s sacrifice to the Father and

*intercedes* for the Church, the living, and the dead. Finally he makes the great acclamation, “Through him, and with him, and in him, to you, God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, is all honor and glory, forever and ever”. All answer, “Amen!” in union with Christians who have shared this same treasure for two thousand years.

### **The Opening Dialogue, Preface and Holy, Holy**

At the Last Supper, Jesus led the disciples in familiar Jewish meal prayers they had known from childhood. The final prayer – prayed over a cup of wine which would be shared by everyone -- began with the following dialogue:

*Host:* Let us give thanks unto our Lord God.

*Guests:* Blessed be the Name of the Lord from this time forth for evermore.

*Host:* With the assent of those present we will bless Him of whose bounty we have partaken.

*Guests:* Blessed be He of whose bounty we have partaken and through whose goodness we live.

This Last Supper dialogue still echoes in the opening dialogue of our Eucharistic Prayer:

*Presider:* “Lift up your hearts!”

*People:* “We lift them up to the Lord.”

*Presider:* “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

*People:* “It is right and just.”

These words, translated to better reflect the Latin original, call us to pray the Eucharistic prayer with the priest-presider. As the 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop John Chrysostom said: “The entire local community, as the chosen people of God, offers the Eucharistic prayer pronounced by the priest, and expressly commissions him to speak in its name...” The priest, he implies, is the mouthpiece of the people’s thanksgiving prayer. *We* are the praying, and he is the servant of our praise.

The first prayer the priest offers in our name begins: “Father, all powerful and ever-living God....” These are the first words of the prefaces, prayers of praise which change with the feasts and seasons. Then the community sings together the song Isaiah heard in his vision of God’s throne: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts” (Is 6:3). ((Note that the words have changed from “Lord God of power and might” to “Lord God of *hosts*”. This more accurately translates the Hebrew word *sabaoth*, a plural noun imaging God as the powerful leader of heavenly armies.) As the Eucharistic Prayer begins, all that we have brought to the altar in the preparation of gifts is caught up in Christ’s perfect praise of the Father.

## **The Sacrifice of Thanksgiving and the Memorial Acclamation**

In the centuries before science unlocked the mysteries of life, people felt completely dependent on the gods for survival. Divine beings were believed to control floods, drought, darkness, light, birth, barrenness, and human destiny. People tried to communicate with the gods by offering sacrifice. Returning some precious part of the heavenly gifts was a way to say, "Please give us a good harvest," or "I'm sorry for my sin" or "Thank you for strong healthy lambs".

We know that the Israelites sacrificed to *their* God in ways similar to their pagan neighbors. There were different types of sacrifices for different purposes. Some were totally burned – holocausts. Others were "shared" with God – part was offered and part was taken home to be eaten by the family. The rules for these sacrifices are written in Leviticus, chapters 6:8-7:37. The Jewish Passover lamb was the victim in a "shared" sacrifice of thanksgiving for deliverance from slavery. After the priests killed the lamb, they splashed its blood onto the altar – God's part. Then the meat was taken home for the family to cook and eat. Leftovers were completely burned, since they were sacred.

At His last meal with the disciples – a Paschal meal – Jesus, the Lamb of God, gave us the ongoing sacrifice of thanksgiving we call the Eucharist. During *our* symbolic meal, we continue to offer gifts of bread and wine, giving our lives to the Father in union with Jesus' life. By the power of the Spirit and the words Jesus said that night, our gifts are transformed. Jesus becomes present as our Food ready to make us one Body, one life with him and one another. Finally the priest calls us to acclaim this paschal mystery of faith in words which connect past, present and future in one eternal *now*:

"We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again."

"When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again."

"Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free."

## **The Great Amen**

It is easy to be distracted during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Hunting for a lost Cheerio, daydreaming, mentally paying bills during the priest's gestures and long prayers can pull our focus away from their powerful symbolic meaning. Even the elevation of the consecrated elements and the Memorial Acclamation don't always bring us back. Suddenly it is the end, and the priest is singing:

'Through him, with Him, and in Him, to you, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, is all honor and glory, forever and ever.'

Our answering, "Amen!" – short as it is – is the most important acclamation of the Mass. By this one word we say "yes" to the action of Christ which has transformed our offering. A quote from 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman writer, Justin Martyr, explains its meaning.

Taking the elements, the presider gives praise and glory to the Father of all in the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and gives thanks at length for the gifts that we were worthy to receive from Him. When he has finished the prayers and thanksgiving, the whole crowd, standing by, cries out in agreement: "Amen".

The author then comments: Notice...the sharp emphasis which Justin puts on the seemingly unimportant matter of the congregation's Amen. The thanksgiving spoken by the one presiding comes from the heart of the whole assembly and is confirmed by all. *Justin, who was himself a layman, bears witness by this detail how much value the faithful set on their pronouncing this word.* (Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, p. 14 -15. Emphasis added.)

*Amen*, a never-translated acclamation, comes from the Hebrew root, *emen*, meaning "to be firm, solid". When this final word rings out "from the heart of the whole assembly", we are really saying: "We believe this and are ready to stand on it. It is solid." Wanting to really mean what we say at this moment may help us focus our attention during the Eucharistic Prayer so that we can truly feel our "Amen!" and be worthy to sing it.