

The Overall Structure and Meaning

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist we ritually remember Jesus' "taking" bread and wine and "blessing" God for all they represent. In the Communion Rite – the high point of the Mass – that food and drink are "broken" and "given," completing our symbolic feast with God and one another.

First, we prepare to receive communion by remembering and, if necessary, re-establishing communion with one another. We pray the Our Father, saying, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." This is not a moment to take lightly, since we call down judgment on our own heads if we refuse to be reconciled (see Matt 5:23-24).

After these words expressing reconciliation, we make a *gesture of peace*, another opportunity to release anyone we still hold bound (Mt 18:18:18). The priest's ritual words, "The peace of the Lord be with you always," make it clear that *we* are not the source of the peace we offer. Jesus is the well from which we drink a comforting thought on those days when we feel completely incapable of forgiveness.

Next the priest-presider *breaks the bread* as the community sings to the Lamb that was slain. This powerful ritual moment layers image upon image: we remember the Paschal Lamb whose blood protected the Israelites from death, the Passover loaf broken and shared by a community, Christ's Body broken by us and for us, and our individual broken-ness caught up in Christ's passion and somehow strengthening others.

Finally we make our journey to the altar-table. If we have participated fully and consciously to this point, we are surely ready to receive what is offered to us: "The Body – the Blood of Christ." These words mean not only the person of Jesus but also His entire living Body – nothing less than the life of each person present. When the gifts we offer are consecrated, *we are consecrated too*. Now in this *Holy Communion*, all who receive the same transformed Food take in not only Christ but everyone and everything that has found its way into Christ's heart. To this mystery we say, "Amen."

The Our Father

In the first Christian centuries, the Our Father (cf Mt 6:9-13) was kept secret from all but the initiated. Non-Christians never heard it, and the Elect received it for the first time shortly before their Baptism. Only those made children of God through re-birth in Christ were permitted to say, "Our Father...." As God's children, Christians prayed this prayer just before the sacred Eucharistic meal.

Unlike His contemporaries, who only ate with social equals, Jesus shared meals with anyone. Several of His parables speak of "kingdom banquets" where poor and rich, stranger and friend, even Jew and Gentile sat down together (Mt 7:11-12, Lk 14:16-23). Luke tells us that Christians continued such meals after Pentecost: "All who believed... broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:44-46). Faith in Jesus was the only criterion of welcome. Such counter-cultural "breaking of the bread" – an early term for the Eucharist – signaled the breaking of barriers, the coming of God's reign.

The Our Father still prepares us to eat the Eucharistic “kingdom banquet” with other believers.

Saying

- “Our Father...” means that we are God’s true children.
- “Your kingdom come...” is a prayer of submission: “Do in me, in us, whatever will make this heaven-on-earth.”
- “Give us this day our daily bread” asks both for the sacred food we are about to share and the earthly bread necessary to sustain us in this world.
- “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” expresses our readiness to give and receive the gift of reconciliation as we come to the table of the Lord.
- “Lead us not into temptation...” – better translated “do not bring us to the time of trial” – refers to the anguish Jesus suffered in the Garden, before Pilate, and on the cross at the hands of the Evil One, who still prowls about the world “like a roaring lion...seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8).

When this familiar prayer takes root in our minds and hearts in the context of the Eucharist it transforms us, helping us live as God’s children now.

The Sign of Peace

A text in the prophecy of Micah reveals the meaning of perfect shalom, that Hebrew word usually translated as “peace.”

“...they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid....” (Micah 4:3b-4)

Shalom is not just the absence of war but the fruit of harmony. Earth’s metals become tools for feeding people and tending the land. Everyone has enough and no one has too much. Kings do not covet land or glory, and young people have no need to learn violence. Everyone works for a living but enjoys leisure time too – and “no one shall make them afraid.”

Fear drives out peace, whether it is fear of bodily harm, fear of being unable to make a living, fear of seeing children face sickness or joblessness or aimless-ness, fear of our own sin and what it does to the fabric of community. Just before the Sign of Peace we pray: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us....” The Peace seals these words, drives out fear, and moves us closer to Micah’s vision.

Different cultures communicate “peace” differently; and in fact the liturgical text requires no particular formula. The presider invites us to “offer each other the sign of peace.” Then the rubrics say, “...all offer one another a sign, *in keeping with local customs*, that expresses, peace, communion and charity.” In Japan, people bow to one another. Latin Christians may share a warm *embrazzo*. In more northern countries there might be a handshake or a nod. Words are used or not; but the meaning remains the same: “I offer you the fruits of peace which flow from our union in the Lord.” That union, soon to be deepened in Holy Communion, brings about the *shalom* of God on this earth. In other words, the Kingdom is coming because Christ-in-us is making it happen.

The Lamb of God/

Breaking of Bread

After the Sign of Peace, the presider breaks the consecrated bread in preparation for Communion. This breaking, the third of the four primary Eucharistic actions, reminds us that the Lord’s body, like the Passover lamb, was broken for our liberation.

The image of the sacrificial lamb appears often in scripture. The first time – a heart-wrenching moment – is young Isaac’s question to his father: “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham assures his beloved son that God will provide a lamb – but not before the knife is raised over Isaac’s head (Gen 22:1-18). In the temple, Lambs were sacrificed as daily thank-offerings. When the Israelites fled Egypt, a lamb’s blood protected their homes and lives from the Angel of Death (Ex 12:21-23). New Testament writers often associate Jesus with the Passover lamb:

- Paul: “...our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival...” (1 Cor 5:7b-8a).
- Peter: “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (1 Pet 1:18).
- John, quoting the Baptist: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29).
- John the Seer: “Then I saw...a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5:6-7).

Roman liturgy borrowed the “Lamb of God” chant from the East. Christians there connected the Breaking of the Bread with the Lord’s passion and death. Pope St. Sergius, a Syrian, brought this symbolic understanding into the West during his reign. The image of the sacrificial lamb touches all of us. Sacrifice is part of every human life, and our sufferings are presented among the other gifts we offer during the Preparation of the Altar. When the priest breaks the consecrated bread, our lives are ritually broken open, just as the body of Jesus was once broken on the cross. “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us...grant us peace.”

Holy Communion

An anthropologist might call a Catholic Mass “a retelling of the group’s myth followed by a symbolic meal.” This may be scientifically accurate, but it doesn’t touch the depth of a believer’s experience. The anthropologist describes external words and actions but can neither speak nor read the “language” of their deeper meaning. Believers fluent in the symbol system, however, understand nuances unavailable to the outsider. For believers, the symbols point to something personally, profoundly real.

These considerations are particularly significant at the climax of the liturgy’s words and actions, the moment of Holy Communion. Leading up to this moment, a gathering of individuals is gradually transformed into one living whole. Through the proclamation and preaching of the Scriptures, through the presenting of bread and wine, through the priest’s prayer over the gifts, we are united with the sacrifice of Jesus, our risen Lord. The bread and wine are trans-formed, and we are transformed. Then in Jesus’ presence we pray as children of one Father and give and receive peace from one another. Finally, walking together in procession to the altar table, one by one we are fed on the consecrated bread and wine, signs of the Lord Jesus *and* our transformed community. We are one with each other, body, soul, and spirit.

Pope John Paul speaks about this mystery in the words of John Chrysostom, a 4th century bishop,

For what is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ—not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made up of many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ. (*Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 23 – Pope John Paul II)

Mere science cannot explain these things. Even we who believe can only wonder at our Lord’s amazing self-gift and allow it to grow deeper in us at every communion.

The Post-communion Prayer

The Acts of the Apostles 8:26-39 tells how Philip the deacon overtook a chariot carrying a man who was reading from Isaiah 53. Philip asked the man if he understood the text. At the end of their conversation, Philip baptized him and sent him on his way with a new faith in Jesus. How did Philip know what the man was reading? Because he had been reading aloud. This may seem strange to us, but it was ordinary in that day and time. (Reading aloud is still common in many Middle-Eastern and Asian countries.)

This scriptural story may provide some clue to the origin of the Eucharistic “collect” prayers. In early Christian centuries when the presider called for prayer, the whole community simply began to pray aloud. (This happens today at charismatic gatherings.) When the people finished praying, the presider spoke a single “collected” prayer to which all said, “Amen.” This back-and-forth dialogue characterizes collects.

Collect prayers act like “end punctuation” to the Gathering Rite, the Preparation of Gifts and Table, and the Communion Rite. The 2003 revision of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) says: “The people...make the prayer their own with the acclamation, *Amen*” (par 54, 77, and 89). This *Amen!* – “It is solid!” – completes the collect.

Special posture and gesture also characterize collect prayers. When the presider calls the assembly to pray, all stand and pray silently. Then the presider extends his hands to embrace the whole community and draws their silent prayers into a single spoken prayer offered to the Father through Jesus. Collects are more ritually powerful when presider and people, following the recommendation of the GIRM 2003 (par 39-40), sing all the words. This strengthens the contrast between singing and silence and makes the final “Amen!” more stirring. The final collect of the Mass concludes the Communion Rite, when presider and people are most deeply “in communion” with one another and with Jesus. The people’s “Amen!” the last word in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, prepares us to be sent forth carrying the Body of Christ to the world.