



TEACHING ON THE MASS

PART FOUR: LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

When I was growing up my mom would insist that we all learn how to cook, clean, and do laundry. Her reasoning for this was simple: she said, “You are not going to depend on someone else to keep you alive.” Also, in cleaning the house she was just as direct, “You people made the mess; therefore, you are going to clean the mess.” I started cleaning the house and cooking at about ten years old. I learned to do laundry by the time I was fourteen. Fast forward to my freshman orientation at Boston College; in my orientation group there were about twenty of us and

our orientation guide asked us, “How many of you know how to do laundry?” What amazed me was that only four out of the twenty had been taught to do our own laundry. I simply took for granted that anyone my age could do laundry.

There are many things we can easily take for granted, and one of the most powerful for Catholics is the Mass. It is an awesome gift that God has given us to help keep us spiritually alive. The difference here—from my mom’s reasoning—is that we actually depend on *God* to stay alive. And the gift God gives us, to stay alive, unfolds in a powerful way through the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Almost 2000 years ago Jesus gathered his disciples for a meal. It was a Passover-style meal, and they all knew what to expect; but something unexpected happened. “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mt 26:26-28). Those were not the words they were expecting; Jesus had changed the ritual. The changes that Jesus made would make all the difference in the world. In this moment Jesus instituted the Eucharist, giving the greatest gift possible to the Church—himself. We also see in the actions of this celebration how the Liturgy of the Eucharist would be structured. Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave; each of those four actions help us understand the meaning of the Eucharist and how we should live it out in our lives.

The first action in the Liturgy of the Eucharist is the preparation of the gifts, which corresponds to Jesus’ action of taking. The gifts are brought forth by the people as a sign of their self-giving. The bread and wine represent our offering to God, and Jesus takes our gifts and places them on the altar. They are also a sign of our cooperation with God. The wheat and grapes are God’s creations, which human ingenuity turns into bread and wine. God’s gifts to us become our gift to God, which is a precursor to the Eucharist when God will take our gifts and then give us the gift of Jesus. Prayers are said over the bread and wine which are a reminder of where they come from: “fruit of the earth and work of human hands.” Water is mixed into the wine as a reminder of the incarnation (that in the one person of Christ there are two natures, 100% divine and 100% human) and our being joined to Christ. The table is set, the food is placed, and a prayer offered. We are ready to pray the Eucharist Prayer.

This moment in the Mass is center and summit of the entire celebration. Power in the beauty of the Eucharistic Prayer is discovered in all that occurs during this moment. It begins with us recognizing the presence of Christ; the priest says “The Lord be with you” and we respond “And with your spirit.” It continues with us recognizing what our attitudes towards the Lord should be: “We lift up our hearts” and “It is right and just that we should praise the Lord.” This leads us to give thanksgiving to God for some action of Christ which opens us to join with the saints and the angels in heaven crying out, holy, holy, holy... In this moment we should recognize the presence of the saints and the angels among us. We are reminded that heaven and earth are joined together in praising God, and we are called to be part of the heavenly banquet. We continue to praise God and that leads us to the moment when we hear the Institution narrative—the words that Christ used at the Last Supper. We must realize in this moment that this whole prayer is directed to the Father, and that it is *not* the voice of the priest that the Father hears but that of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus alone who is the true minister of the sacraments; the priest is but an instrument of Christ. The priest acts *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ) and so we have a tangible representation of Christ among us. But, as this wonderful prayer is prayed, we need to recognize who is truly praying these words for us. We are simply participating in the worship of Christ. Therefore, as the words “This is my body” are prayed, the Father hears the Son and responds. He pours forth the Holy Spirit on the altar and the bread truly becomes what Christ has just prayed for. It is no longer bread but truly the Body of Christ. And when Jesus prays “This is my blood” the Father hears the Son and responds. He pours forth the Holy Spirit on the altar and the wine truly becomes what

Christ has just prayed for. It is no longer wine but truly the Blood of Christ. God will always make Christ's words true. Each time this prayer is prayed we encounter a true miracle: bread and wine, through the words of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, become his Body and Blood. But, also, in that moment we are clearly in the very presence of the Living God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The veil between heaven and earth is revealed and we enter into the reality of eternity, for eternity is simply being in the presence of God.

At the Last Supper Jesus connected the Eucharist with the Paschal Mystery (his Death, resurrection and ascension) and we remember what He has done for us and we unite ourselves to Him. The Paschal Mystery is not *only* about what happened 2000 years ago: they are an eternal reality. Jesus eternally offers himself on the cross to the Father, rises from the dead, and ascends. And we are called to unite ourselves to Christ and offer our very lives to the Father. The Eucharist is a sacrifice for the simple reason that it makes present to us the sacrifice of the cross, which then becomes our offering to the Father. It is a reminder to us that to be his disciples we must take up the cross and, like Christ, offer our lives to the Father. Jesus then prays for the Holy Spirit to overshadow us and unite us with the saints. We finish by praying for the dead and for the salvation of the world. And the people make it their prayer by saying Amen.

What follows is the Communion Rite whose central focus is the reception of Communion by all the faithful, or Christ's action of giving (*GIRM*, 80). Each element in this rite focuses on sharing the Eucharist, either preparing for it or being invited in prayer to reflect on the meaning of receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord. The elements in this section are the Lord's Prayer, the sign of peace, the breaking of the bread, the reception of Communion, and the final prayer.

We prepare ourselves for reception of Communion by praying in the words that Christ has given us—the Lord's Prayer. As we pray together these words of Christ, it is truly an appropriate prayer to prepare for our reception of Communion. This is considered the perfect prayer since it is Christ who taught us how to pray, and at the same time it contains all the types of prayer that exist. Within the structure of the prayer we have adoration—“hallowed by thy name,” contrition—“forgive us our trespasses,” thanksgiving—our attitude for what we pray for, supplication—“give us this day our daily bread.” It also acts as a reminder of our baptism. It is only through our adoption in baptism that we can call God, Our Father. As we claim our place at the table by calling out to Our Father, we do so *not* as individuals but as a community formed by the Spirit through baptism. We are reminded that our relationship with Christ is not an individual reality but a communal one. We are formed into a community by Christ to live out our salvation in the context of the community formed by Christ. What better way is there to prepare to receive his body than to be reminded of what we are and called to be.

As we recognize that we are united in Christ through praying the Lord's Prayer, we are led into offering the sign of peace. This action can be understood as helping the faithful to prepare to receive. As we extend the sign of peace to those around us, particularly to those we do not know, we are acknowledging our essential unity grounded in Christ that will be fully realized through our common reception of Communion. It helps us prepare to become what we receive—the Body of Christ.

In the New Testament and the early Church, what we call the Mass was referred to as “the breaking of the bread.” Springing from the practical need to break the one single bread so that it could be shared, the gesture is rich in symbolism. Firstly, it is one of the actions of Christ himself. Secondly, the many faithful become one body (1 Corinthians 10:17) by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life which is Christ. The song sung during the breaking of the bread invites us to look with eyes of faith on “the Lamb of God” who takes away the sins of the world.

The next element is the sharing of Communion, which is the final act of the pattern set by Christ. The faithful now receive Communion as a means to share and participate in his sacrifice. It is best if the faithful receive Communion from the elements consecrated at the celebration, as a more complete sign of participation in the sacrifice just celebrated.

The final element in the Communion Rite is a Post-Communion Prayer. This prayer is centered on making real in the lives of the faithful the effects of the mystery just celebrated. The prayer after Communion constitutes a fitting conclusion of the Communion Rite because it calls the faithful to go forth and live what they have just celebrated and received.