

God Loving Us in the Eucharist

We return to our series on the Mass by looking at the Eucharistic Prayer. Every so often after Mass someone will say to me, "Nice service father." I usually respond politely, "Thank you." In reality, the Mass is not a service. The language of a "service" has spilled over from the Protestant world.

Instead, the Mass is an offering. In the Mass, the priest "offers" or "makes present" Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross to the Father. The Cross is Jesus' definitive proof of love for us. He loved us "to the end." In response, He "thirsts" for our love.

In the Mass, the once-for-all offering of Jesus on the Cross is made present to us (in an un-bloody manner) in the bread and wine that becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. It is an offering we partake in not only spiritually with hearts during the prayer, but also sacramentally by partaking of Jesus in the Eucharist. That said, I would be thrilled if someone after the Mass said, "Thanks for the offering father."

In this light, let's look more closely at the Eucharistic Prayer. First, there are four main Eucharistic Prayers. For sake of space, I will only comment on Eucharistic Prayer III because it is the one that is commonly prayed at Sunday Liturgies. I might suggest looking up this prayer and having it available as you read this column.

Eucharistic Prayer III begins by acknowledging God's holiness and that He gives life to all things through His Son. Additionally, He works to gather people to Himself so that through Christ, they may become an offering to Him.

After this short acknowledgement, the prayer turns to what is called the *epiclesis* (meaning "invocation upon"). The priest prays that the Father sends down the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of Christ. To symbolize this, the priest extends his hands out over the bread and wine.

Traditionally, sanctuary bells are rung at this point to signify the coming down of the Holy Spirit. Bells are also traditionally rung at the consecration to signify the miraculous change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. In short, they help focus on our attention.

After the *epiclesis*, the Eucharistic Prayer moves into the Words of Institution and Consecration. These words are very familiar to Catholics and unfortunately, so familiar that we overlook their significance.

Behind them is the Passover where God liberated the Jewish people from Egypt. The Lord instructed the Israelites to secure a lamb, sacrifice it,

eat it, and mark the doorposts with its blood. In doing so, the Lord passed over their houses so that their firstborn sons would be spared from the tenth plague. Year after year, the Israelites re-told the story of Passover and re-enacted it, eating a sacrificial lamb once again.

At the Last Supper (a Passover meal) in the gospels, it's no accident that a lamb is not mentioned. Instead, Jesus is the Lamb. Hence, we see Jesus using sacrificial language of "giving up" His Body and His Blood "poured out" for many. Furthermore, He instructs His Apostles to eat His Body and drink His Blood just as the Israelites were instructed to eat the Passover lamb.

In the Mass, the priest offers Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, to the Father so that Father will "pass over" you and me at our death. In other words, we pray that by eating the true lamb (Jesus!) and drinking His blood, we will pass over from this life to eternal life. And while we may not sprinkle the blood on the doorposts of our homes, we do have the Blood of Jesus on the "doorposts" of our lips.

After the Words of Consecration, the prayer moves into the *anamnesis* (Greek: "liturgical memorial") wherein we recall and make present Jesus' saving Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven. Additionally, we offer Jesus in the Eucharist to the Father as we await His second coming.

The priest then asks the Father to look upon this oblation (offering) of Jesus and that all the faithful who are nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ be filled with the Holy Spirit. In other words, he prays that the holy Eucharist will make the faithful holy!

Finally, the prayer asks that we, the faithful, become an offering with the Church already glorified in heaven (Blessed Virgin Mary, Apostles, Martyrs, etc.), the pilgrim Church on earth (pope, bishops, clergy, and all the faithful), and the Church still being purified (purgatory or our departed brothers and sisters seeking full admittance into God's kingdom). The prayer concludes with the doxology that praises our heavenly Father through, with, and in Christ. In response, the faithful sing "Amen" meaning, "so be it!"

Next week we will conclude our series on the Mass with the Communion Rite and Concluding Rites (i.e., Greeting, Blessing, and Dismissal).

Goldy Headed for Mass

