

Four-Minute Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 9: The Eucharistic Prayer, Part I

The Mass is overflowing with spiritual power in many elements and the Eucharistic Prayer along with Communion is the center and summit of the entire celebration. There are four principal Eucharistic Prayers and what happens during these prayers is truly spectacular. It is the pre-eminent liturgical prayer of the Church. It is a single liturgical act, consisting of several parts woven together as a beautifully crafted masterpiece. In each part, we are called to fully attentive listening, responding, singing and praying; encountering the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as active participants in these proceedings. As we contemplate what is really happening at Mass, the wisdom of the Church's insistence on our participation at Mass every weekend becomes more and more clear.

Today's reflection is the first of three on the structure, elements and actions of this spiritual powerhouse, the Eucharistic Prayer. We will explore the first few parts – the Preface, the Sanctus and the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a familiar three-part dialog between the priest and the congregation, where he draws us into this next phase of the celebration. The priest begins by, saying, *"The Lord be with you."* We respond, *"And with your spirit."* Then, lifting his hands, he says *"Lift up your hearts,"* to which we reply, *"We lift them up to the Lord."* With hands extended widely, he asks us to express our praise and gratitude by, saying, *"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."* And we respond, *"It is right and just."* In this dialogue we are made conscious of our close union with the presiding priest who speaks in the name of all.

The priest then begins the Preface, which means, “proclamation”. The Preface proclaims the wonderful actions of God, both throughout history and in our lives, and offers thanks to God for all these blessings. The Preface is a variable prayer, with over eighty choices for different feast days, liturgical seasons, votive Masses and special occasions.

The Preface concludes with the Sanctus in which the whole assembly joins the song of the angels in giving praise to God in heaven. The text is inspired by the vision in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. There he recounts seeing the Lord seated on a lofty throne, with Seraphim, each with six wings, stationed above and crying to one another “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with his glory.” At every Mass, we connect with the ongoing heavenly liturgy, joining in this magnificent thundering of praise for God. The verse “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, is the acclamation used by the people to greet Christ at his solemn entrance into Jerusalem. The dialogue with the people and the “Holy, Holy” should ordinarily be sung.

The celebration advances to the Epiclesis, which is the calling down of the Holy Spirit. It is a petition asking that the Father send the Holy Spirit to “make holy” or “sanctify” the gifts on the altar so that they may become the Body and Blood of the Lord. To sanctify is a role properly attributed to the Holy Spirit who completes and brings to fullness the work of the Father and the Son. As the priest makes this petition, we see him extend his hands over the gifts of bread and wine in the ancient gesture signifying the giving of the Holy Spirit so that the gifts are sanctified.