

VI. “Lift up your hearts!”

Part One

The Eucharistic Prayer – Center and Summit

These words, “Lift up your hearts,” are found near the beginning of the great prayer of thanksgiving of the Mass – the Eucharistic Prayer. This prayer is the heart of the action that we call the Eucharist:

“Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: the Eucharistic Prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving...” (GIRM 78)

Let’s be honest right off the bat. Not all Catholics experience this prayer as the “center and summit of the entire celebration.” It certainly is curious that even with much good music written to accompany the prayer, with good intentions, and with fine sound systems, many today report a lapse of attention at this key moment. More than most other parts of the liturgy, both presiders and faithful need to attend more deeply to the meaning and purpose of the Eucharistic Prayer.

A Brief Historical Excursus – Jewish Table Prayer

Scholarship has shown that our Eucharistic Prayers are related thematically and structurally to Jewish Table Prayers dating from the time of Jesus. What is interesting to observe here is that, while the Last Supper / Passover tradition informed the Synoptic’s memory of Jesus’ meal before he died, surprisingly it is his meals with sinners that actually gives us the underlying structure for our Eucharistic praying.

We can get a picture of how Jesus probably prayed at the meals he shared with sinners in the saying, “Catholics bless food, while Jews bless God.”

Sitting down to eat, the leader of the meal praised God for creation, thanked God for redemption, and then offered intercessions for the peace of Jerusalem. The blessings of praise and thanksgiving resemble the great narrative psalms of the Bible (e.g., Pss. 103-6). Jewish families gave praise and thanksgiving to God by reciting a narrative of the great deeds God had accomplished on behalf of the people. Therefore, *to say what God has done* in fact offers praise God.

This is what the priest presider does in proclaiming the Eucharistic Prayer: he prays a narrative of the great deeds God has done for us, especially holding up Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And, so, in the Eucharistic Prayer, praise and thanksgiving forms our most basic way of praying.

In our contemporary Eucharistic Prayers, the *Preface*, the prayer that comes just before the *Holy, Holy, Holy*, serves that function of narrating specific deeds of God that the Church remember and give thanks for on that particular day. The Prefaces of the Western Church lay a strong emphasis on God’s work of redemption completed in Christ. We note briefly that, in the history of written Eucharistic Prayers (going back to the 3rd century), the Prayers of the Eastern Church focus more easily and satisfyingly on praise for creation.

A Brief Historical Excursus – The Oral Tradition

The first examples of written Eucharistic Prayers come from the early 3rd century. Before that time, the prayers were composed on the spot by the bishop. The extemporaneous nature of the prayers does not mean that presiders wandered aimlessly hither, thither, and yon. Rather, they were grounded in and built upon the structure of praise, thanksgiving, and intercession, as is evidenced in the earliest *written* Eucharistic Prayers.

“And on the day called Sunday,
all who live in cities or in the country
gather together to one place...
When our prayer is ended,
bread and wine and water are brought,
and the president in like manner offers prayers and
thanksgivings, according to his ability,
and the people assent, saying Amen...”
(Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 67)

Praying the Eucharistic Prayer Today, I

What is the purpose of this prayer for the Church today? What is going on during this prayer? The *General Instruction* can help us all pray it better by appreciating the purposes of the prayer:

“The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving...”

The prayer begins with a tripartite dialogue whose purpose is to unite the presider with the people in prayer and thanksgiving.

... he unites them with himself in the prayer which,
in the name of the entire community,
he addresses to God the Father
through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit...” (GIRM 78)

Let’s acknowledge the challenges inherent in these statements from the start: The Eucharistic Prayer, as it is most often prayed, *seems* like it belongs to the priest alone. Meanwhile, the faithful are allowed to intervene several times with acclamations – this is their “full, active, and conscious participation.” However, as we step back and look again at this notion of the ‘priest uniting the faithful with himself’, perhaps we can all appreciate how we might exercise

our various roles so that we *all* experience the Eucharistic Prayer as *one* prayer prayed by Church.

First of all, a burden is placed directly on the presider that he “unite [the faithful] with himself.” This is not meant to be a metaphysical or theoretical ‘uniting’ only. The priest needs to pray the prayer in such a manner as to unite the People of God that all experience the prayer as the prayer of the whole Church, together, as one.

The bishops of Vatican II understood that, as Christ unites the Church to himself to offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father, so, too, the priest unites the faithful to himself in the Eucharistic Prayer.

This is the sixth in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass. Article #7 is entitled, “*Lift Up Your Hearts!*” Part Two

Praying the Eucharistic Prayer Today, II

One final preparatory comment: the *General Instruction* invites the entire community to pray together in the present “full, active, and conscious” experience of the Trinity. What might that look like? The Body of Christ in the world, drawn together as one by the Spirit, stands (at the *Preface*) united to the Risen Christ to pour ourselves out to the Father in praise and thanksgiving for the *magnalia dei*, the great deeds God has done for us in creation and redemption.

In that same vein, the *Instruction* tells us that the first purpose of the Eucharistic Prayer is to “confess the great things God has done.” It asks us to focus the reason for our gratitude on the *magnalia dei* more so than on the daily good things we have experienced. We are asked to be mindful of this bigger picture of creation and redemption and, so, to praise God, our Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier who continues to labor faithfully for us and the world.

The quotation below points next to the charge that the *faithful* bear in praying this prayer. Note:

The liturgy, then, is rightly seen
*as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ...
In it full public worship is performed by
the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is,
by the Head and his members.*

From this it follows that every liturgical celebration,
*because it is an action
of Christ the Priest and of his Body,
which is the Church,
is a sacred action surpassing all others.
(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7)*

Please listen to the Eucharistic Prayer next time and attend to the many occurrences of the word, “we,” “us,” and “our” in the Eucharistic Prayer.

For Presiders & Assembly: A Brief Excursus on *Pace and Attention*

Can we talk? Most presiders seem to fly through this prayer at a pace that no one, except the presider himself, can follow. Some seem to try to make up time for having given a long homily. Others seem to speed through if in order to dampen the impact of the prayer’s soporific effect on his congregation. Still others seem to hurry in order to avoid parishioners’ criticism for Mass going too long. Meanwhile, the faithful doze.

The Eucharistic Prayer never attains its full stature as the “center and summit” of the liturgy. However, an understanding grasp of the meaning and purpose of the prayer might just allow it to serve its function as “center and summit.”

The combination of a slow pace with intelligent pauses can allow both presider and congregation to grow in their common ability to pray in thanksgiving and praise for God’s great deeds done in Christ. It will take the presider’s own prayerful comprehension of the prayer *as well* as the attentive and receptive hearing by the People of God, in order to bring the Eucharistic Prayer back to life in such a way that *all* – presider and faithful – actually experience it as the “summit and source” of the celebration.

“... Furthermore, the meaning of the prayer is that
*the entire congregation of the faithful
should join itself with Christ
in confessing the great things God has done
and in offering the sacrifice...* (GIRM 78)

This final part of the instruction (#78) serves as a very strong invitation to both priest and congregation to create the ‘conditions for the possibility’ that this prayer might actually be experienced as the one prayer of the Church.

The Eucharistic Prayer demands that *all* listen to it with reverence and in silence.” (GIRM 78)

Parts of the Eucharistic Prayer – 1st Installment

The GIRM tells us the meaning of the various parts of this prayer. We begin this week with the *Preface*:

I. Thanksgiving – the *Preface*

The *Preface* is the part of this prayer that changes from Sunday to Sunday, or from season to season. Observe that the prayer serves as the prayer of the whole Church that stands to praise of the *magnalia dei*:

“*Thanksgiving* (expressed especially in the preface):
*... in the name of the entire holy people,
the priest glorifies God the Father
and gives thanks for the whole work of salvation
or for some special aspect of it that corresponds to the
day, festivity, or season.*” (GIRM 79a)