

Understanding the Mass: The Liturgy of the Eucharist, Part I

I. Introduction to the Liturgy of the Eucharist:

- A. **Four Presences of Christ at Mass:** Christ is present in four ways during the Mass. First: when we gather as a community in worship. Second: when the Lord speaks directly to us through the person proclaiming the words from the scriptures. Today we will look at the other two presences: in the ministry of the ordained priest and in the Eucharistic species.
- B. **Three Tables:** Today's focus is on the second table, the Table of Eucharist. We are invited to dine with the Lord, eating bread and drinking wine. But as we will see, it is much more than just ordinary bread and wine and dining. It is Christ himself who feeds us with his Body and Blood.
- C. **Importance of Memory:** Without memory, we become lost. The Word of God is our story and it's important to know the story of our faith which we learn from the Scriptures. It is also important that we know the Eucharist, both what and who it is, and what it means for our lives. Christ said, "Do this in memory of me" during the Last Supper and invites us to do so weekly. In the Eucharistic Prayer we hear the words "memory," "remember," and "memorial." The Latin root of these words is *memoria*. Its meaning is not simply a recalling of a past event. Actually, the bonds of time and place are broken (*kairos* and *chronos* merge) as we pray the Eucharistic Prayer and we, here and now, share and take part anew in the very dying and rising of Christ that occurred nearly 2000 years ago to help us with our own experiences of dyings and risings in life.
- D. **An Analogy:** Note: All analogies are imperfect, but here's one to describe the three parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. You have received an invitation to dine at someone's home. There are 3 basic things they and you will do: 1) They will prepare the dining room table for the meal; 2) They will prepare the meal; and 3) you will come and share with them the meal they have prepared.

II. Liturgy of the Eucharist: Preparation Rites (Setting the Table):

- A. **Offertory:** The collection is our acknowledgment of God's generosity to us and an expression of gratitude. It invites us to go beyond caring only for our own needs and to share our bounty with others, especially those in need.
- B. **Preparation of Altar/Presentation of Gifts:** Bread/wine is presented with the collection by representatives of community. In antiquity, the procession was accompanied by singing or music.
- C. **Initial Actions/Prayers at the Altar with the Gifts:** The blessing texts of bread/wine is based on Jewish table prayers said by the father of the family. They emphasize 1) the generosity of God, 2) the produce of the earth that makes bread/wine possible, 3) the human labor required for wheat/grapes to become bread/wine, and 4) the Eucharist they will become. The words are affirmed by the community when said aloud with "Blessed be God forever." // A little water is placed in the chalice: originally done to dilute strong wine but later symbolizes union with Christ with the people: Just as wine receives the water, so Christ takes us and our sins to himself. Also came to represent the divine (wine) and human (water) natures of Christ. // Washing of hands invokes priest's desire for inner purity and, practically, to clean his hands before handling food.
- D. **Prayer over the Offerings:** People and priest offer a prayer asking that what is about to be offered is acceptable to God. It concludes with a prayer by the priest.

III. Liturgy of the Eucharist: Eucharistic Prayer (Preparing the Sacred Meal):

- A. **Prayer:** Most important prayer we pray as Catholic Christians. Paradox: someone extraordinary (Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of humanity) comes into our midst in something ordinary (bread and wine). The victory of Christ over death and sin is given to us anew so we too may experience real triumph and victory over sin and death in our lives and for the welfare of others. There are 13 different Eucharistic Prayers to choose from.
- B. **Two Priesthoods Praying:** The ministerial priest acts in the person of Christ the head of the Church during this prayer through his ordination which has configured him to Christ the eternal High Priest. The ministerial priest associates the baptismal priests with himself in the prayer addressed to God. The entire congregation, head (priest) and members (laity), offers the Sacrifice. The opening dialogue at the beginning of the prayer, the Holy, Holy, Holy, the Acclamation of Faith, and especially the Great Amen are places where the people actively exercise their priesthood. Singing the acclamations emphasizes the solemnity of what we are doing.
- C. **Posture:** Two traditions exist: standing and kneeling. Kneeling is normative in the U.S., but for U.S. communities whose practice of standing has been continuous for at least 30 years, standing may continue. Standing emphasizes the two priesthoods acting in union with one another. Anyone may stand or kneel in distinction from the communal posture of the community during this time.
- D. **Epiclesis:** Before the words of consecration, the priest extends his hands downward over the bread and wine. This is a solemn calling down of the Holy Spirit asking that the Holy Spirit change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
- E. **Institution Narrative:** The priest recounts the events of the Last Supper as the bonds of time and place are progressively being broken (*kairos* and *chronos*) such that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross becomes present to us in the bread and wine as we pray the Eucharistic Prayer. These words are understood to be the words of consecration. After each element is consecrated, the priest genuflects and the people bow their heads in union with him as a sign of respect and adoration.
- F. **Anamnesis (Greek equivalent of *Memoria*):** Following the Institution Narrative, we proclaim our belief that the redeeming passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ (the sacred mysteries) are now present in our midst and the graces of these saving events are now available to us in the consecrated bread and wine. The people proclaim this first in the Acclamation of Faith and then the priest proclaims it in the words immediately after the people's acclamation.
- G. **Intercessions:** We celebrate the Eucharist in communion with the whole Church, of both heaven and earth, and our offering of the Eucharistic Prayer is made for the Church, all its members, living and deceased, as well as for those who are not members of the Church. Texts vary.
- H. **Doxology and Amen:** The prayer concludes with a solemn glorification of the Holy Trinity in which the whole community sings the praises of God in, with, and through Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. The Amen concludes and affirms the prayer and is the action of the people who have the final word about this great prayer of thanksgiving, an exercise of their baptismal priesthood.

RESOURCES:

Holy See. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, 3rd edition. 2002.

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html

Irwin, Kevin W. *Models of the Eucharist*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005.

Turner, Paul. *At the Supper of the Lamb*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011.