

REFLECTION 9

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER – Part I

Every single moment of the Christian life is meant to bring us to an eventual personal encounter with Christ. That means when Mass begins, we start to take the first steps toward a real encounter with the person of Jesus. Until now in the Mass, we have sensed Christ's presence in subtle ways, even acknowledging his presence through the Word, but now we have reached the moment in which our encounter with him becomes physical, tangible, and complete.

Every moment of our Christian life leads us to this specific moment of the Mass. Because this is the most important moment of the Mass and the Source and Summit of the Christian Life, it will require a deep and extensive analysis. So, for this reflection, we will focus on the first part of the Eucharistic prayer.

It begins with a moment of community participation that starts with the repeating call-and-response found throughout the Mass: "The Lord be with you - and with your Spirit." God is truly

present here with us. Then, we say: "Lift up your hearts - we lift them up to the Lord." While the priest has his hands extended in the ancient orans position praying in the person of Christ, we as a congregation emulate the interior petition that is most often found in artistic depictions of Mary; instead of having her hands outstretched when addressing God, she keeps them close to her heart with her eyes raised to the Heavens, treasuring all these things in her heart (Luke 2:51).

Finally, we say, "Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God - it is right and just." With this final response, the priest speaks to God on our behalf that it is truly right and just, our duty, to give Him thanks because it is due to Him. This prayer is called the Preface, and it proclaims the greatness of God that is found throughout history, the history we have been reliving throughout the Mass, and in our own lives. The Preface ends with the Priest calling upon us to repeat the words uttered by the choirs of Angels in Heaven.

The Sanctus begins with "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts..." Because the Mass is inherently biblical and is based entirely on what can be found in Scripture, we receive these words from both the Old Testament in Isaiah and the New Testament in the book of Revelation. These are the words uttered by the purest beings in the immediate presence of God in Heaven. This is a big deal. It reveals to us that at this exact moment in the Mass, and only in the Mass, we are receiving a glimpse of Heaven itself.

This glimpse of Heaven is not because of the community or the priest or even the beauty of the church. It is the eventual presentation of the Eucharist. Combined with these words is the salutation that Jesus was greeted with upon entering Jerusalem for the last time before his death on the cross, further emphasizing that Christ's sacrifice is the Heavenly vision.

The congregation now kneels. We kneel because we are about to experience something monumental. This is not "celebratory" in the way other moments of the Mass are when we stand together. Neither is this moment passive so that we may sit while this is happening. Kneeling indicates that something is going on that requires us to humble ourselves to understand it.

Some of the first words uttered by the Priest when we kneel are called the Epiclesis invoking the Holy Spirit to come down upon the gifts made by human hands so that they may become the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate these mysteries. The priest extends his hands over the gifts in the same way the Temple priest would extend his hands over the sacrifices that were presented on the altar in ancient Judaism.