

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

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Eucharist, as we know, means “thanksgiving.” To be thankful is to be grateful—to offer gratitude. “Thank you” is the response we make to someone who has either given something to us or has done something for us. God did not give us something, as much as he gave us someone: his very own Son. In the Eucharistic Prayer we pray to God the Father, through the Son, that the Holy Spirit will transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ so that we might enter deeper communion with God and one another. We also pray that we are transformed, so that we “may be filled with his Holy Spirit / and become one body, one spirit in Christ.” This prayer, then, is our response to God’s immense gift of love given to us, especially in the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic Prayer, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification, is the “center and summit” of the Mass (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 78). Because this prayer is the summit, everything that happens in the liturgy is leading us to this high point. The altar is prepared, gifts of bread and wine are brought up in a procession, given to the priest celebrant (or deacon) so that these gifts might be prepared. Then, the Eucharistic Prayer begins with the priest presider proclaiming, “The Lord be with you.” The great prayer concludes with the liturgical assembly singing, “Amen.” Currently, there are eleven Eucharistic Prayers from which a priest presider may choose: I–IV, two Masses of Reconciliation, one for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, and four for Masses with Children.

Following the Eucharistic Prayer, is the Communion Rite, which is a subsection of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This rite consists of the Lord’s Prayer (Our Father), the Rite of Peace, the Fraction Rite, the Communion procession, the period of silence and / or the Song of Thanksgiving and finally the Prayer after Communion. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (the document containing the majority of rubrics for the Mass) states, “In the Lord’s Prayer a petition is made for daily good, which for Christians means preeminently the Eucharistic bread, and also for purification from sin, so that what is holy may, in fact, be given to those who are



holy” (81). This is a beautiful statement: “. . . so that what is holy may, in fact, be given to those who are holy.” What makes us holy, the body and blood of Christ. After praying for our “daily bread” we are invited to offer a sign of peace. In scripture, Christ wished his disciples the greetings, “Peace be with you!” on several occasions. As Christ offers us peace, we extend that peace to others. Christ’s peace calls us to holiness and prepares us for the reception of his body and blood. Then, the “Lamb of God” or “Agnus Dei” is sung while the priest celebrant or deacon breaks the host in preparation for the Communion procession. This is not a functional moment, but contains a beautiful theology: The one host is broken for the

many so that the many may become one body (See GIRM, 83). This is a definition of Communion: Many become one in Christ Jesus.

In the Communion procession, three actions occur. The first action is the processing forward itself; the second is singing the Communion song or antiphon; and the third is the reception of the body and blood of Christ. The Communion song’s “purpose is to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the ‘communitarian’ nature of the procession to receive Communion” (GIRM, 86). The act of processing, the singing the song and the receiving of Christ’s body and blood all manifest the liturgical assembly’s being brought closer into communion or unity with the Triune God.

Finally, the Liturgy of the Eucharist concludes with a period of silent prayer and the Prayer after Communion. This is the opportunity for the liturgical assembly to pray for Christ’s body and blood to bear fruit in their lives. Each part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist—as well as the Liturgy of the Word—is about the Triune God working in our midst and calling us to become holy as God is holy.

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