Explaining the Eucharist (XIII): The Eucharistic Prayer

After the Preface and *Sanctus* begins the most solemn and sacred part of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, during which the priest, by consecrating the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus, makes present on the Altar Christ's one and only Sacrifice and offers to the Father the perfect sacrifice of adoration, thanksgiving, petition and atonement.

A brief history

If you open the modern Anglican or Roman Missal, you will find several Eucharistic prayers in both. This great variety of prayers, though, is a contemporary invention (it would exceed the limits of this article to discuss whether it is a good or bad invention), and before the 20th century there was in practice only one Eucharistic Prayer in the Western Church: the so called “Roman Canon.”

I am not going to write much about the history of Eucharistic prayers (especially not those of the Eastern Churches), but we must remember two things:

a) almost every Eucharistic prayer in use before the 1970s, whether in the Western or in the Eastern Churches, originates from the Roman, or Alexandrian, or Antiochian Eucharistic prayer;

b) these three Eucharistic prayers (Rome, Antioch and Alexandria) show a surprising similarity, so we can presume that, even if not in their present elaborate form, their core elements go back to the Apostles themselves, to their Eucharistic doctrine and practice. If you think about it, this is a beautiful, moving testimony to the Church being “apostolic”, founded on the Apostles: the Eucharistic prayers, through the Apostles, constitute an uninterrupted link between the Upper Room of the Last Supper and our own churches.

Let’s concentrate now on the Western Church. We have this noble and ancient prayer, the Roman Canon, unchanged at least since the 4th century (apart from two additions made by Popes Leo and Gregory the Great), with some parts reaching back to when S. Peter stayed in Rome and the church started taking shape. The text shows clear signs of the language used at the Roman Imperial court (for example: the opening words “most merciful Father” were the standard formula for petitions directed to the Emperor in court), and its references to the Old Testament presuppose an author with deep knowledge of the rites and theology of the Temple in Jerusalem, perhaps S. Peter himself?

But we do not use the Roman Canon here at LSM, so why should we even bother with its origins? Well, as I mentioned above, it was the only Eucharistic prayer in use in the Western Church. So when Thomas Cranmer decided to write his own liturgical book (the Book of Common Prayer) he used the Roman Canon as his main source. And even if he cut it into pieces and changed it according to his own theological views, the Roman Canon is still very much recognisable in the BCP and in its “modern” version: the Eucharistic Prayer C in Common Worship (used at LSM during Advent and Lent, and often on weekdays).


Eucharistic prayer has had many names during its history. It has been called Prayer, Action, Canon, Rule, Anaphora and many other things. All these names though can be grouped around three meanings.

First, titles such as Canon, *Regula* or *Legitimum* show us the Eucharistic prayer as the “norm”: the norm given by the Church. There is no Eucharist, there are no sacraments without or outside the Church. The greatest treasure we have, the Eucharist (real presence, sacrifice, nourishment and
pledge of eternal life) has been entrusted to the Church, and not even the celebrant can change the
text of the Eucharistic prayer. While it is a gift given to us, it is not ours to possess. It is ours only to
accept. Also, as the ancient saying (lex credendi lex orandi) shows, faith (belief) and prayer belong
together, and each influences the other. Our faith regulates our prayer; but also how we pray has a
great influence on what we believe. That is why the Eucharistic Prayer can be changed only by the
Church: it expresses the faith of the Church, and it forms our own faith. The Church in the Mass
shows her own faith and teaches it to us.

Another aspect of the Eucharistic prayer is expressed by titles like Actio, Anaphora, Agenda. The
Latin ago (hence the English words to act, action) and its Greek correspondent ὀρασία were often
used in the sense of “offering sacrifice, perform sacred rites or mysteries”, just as the word
Anaphora (the only name used by the Eastern Churches) from the Greek ἀναφέρειν indicates the
priest’s offering up of the selected portion of a sacrificial victim upon the altar (see, e.g. Leviticus
2.14,16; 3.1,5). I have already written about sacrifice in previous articles, so it is enough here to
remind ourselves of the fact that the Eucharist, the Mass, is the Sacrifice of the New Testament,
offered for both the living and the departed.

And finally we have the expression “Eucharistic Prayer” or simply prex (“prayer”). The word
“Eucharistic” obviously refers to the Eucharist (it is during this prayer that bread and wine become
the Body and Blood of our Lord), but it also means “of thanksgiving”. The Eucharistic Prayer is the
great prayer of thanksgiving to God for the work of our salvation, and for all the grace and all His
gifts He continuously bestows upon us. And of course “prayer” means prayer - but not only in the
common sense of the word (we, the priest and congregation, pray during the Eucharist). The Mass
is “the great prayer”, the supreme act of worship, the most pleasing act of worship we will be ever
able to offer to God, because it is Christ, the one and only High Priest who prays, and offers His
love, His sacrifice, Himself to the Father.

Structure

Though Eucharistic prayers may vary a great deal they all have (more or less) the same elements,
even if in a different order. The main parts are:

Thanksgiving and doxology - every Eucharistic prayer ends in doxology, that is, a short form of
praise. Some prayers give thanks to God for His gifts (spiritual and material), but not all of them,
since we have already done that in the Preface which is regarded as an organic part of the
Eucharistic prayer;

Epiclesis (from the Greek “calling down from on high”) - the celebrant, with hands extended over
the bread and wine, calls down the Holy Spirit on them so that they may become the Body and
Blood of Jesus Christ. Its absence from the Roman Canon shows how ancient the Canon is; it was
composed before the concept of epiclesis entered the Liturgy;

Consecration - this is the central part of every Eucharistic prayer. The priest first narrates the
institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and then, after a brief pause, pronounces the words
“This is My body” and “This is the cup of My blood” in the name of Jesus (or, as the Church
Fathers saw it: Jesus pronounces these words “using” the priest’s tongue and voice). This is the
moment when bread and wine cease to be merely bread and wine, and while they maintain their
appearance (“accidents” in Aquinas' language) the risen Lord really and truly becomes present on
the Altar;

Anamnesis (from Greek “reminiscence” or “memorial”) - normally after the Consecration, the
Eucharistic prayer recalls to our mind Jesus’ passion and death;
Resurrection and ascension - this is not a mere reminiscence, nor a simple recollection of past events. Just as when the Jews remembered and retold the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and thus became part of that very saving story, we too (and even more so), become participants in Jesus’ great work of salvation. The Eucharist gives us a share in His triumph over sin and death, and offers a true foretaste of our own victory over the same;

Offering or oblation - obviously the Eucharist is primarily about God; not about us, not about the community. Thus everything is offered to God: the very same Eucharist, ourselves, our lives with their joys and sorrows, worship and thanksgiving, atonement and satisfaction for our sins;

Intercessions - finally, the prayer contains intercession, normally for the Church (universal and local), the Sovereign, ourselves, the living and the dead.

**Our participation at the Mass**

These basic elements of every Eucharistic prayer give us an idea how to participate prayerfully in the Mass. We praise God for His goodness, holiness, greatness, beauty, love, grace, justice and mercy, and thank Him for all His gifts. We call earnestly upon the Holy Spirit and ask Him to transform us more and more into Christ’s likeness, just as bread and wine become Jesus’ body and blood. We recall to mind God’s saving acts: not just those done for all of us, but also those “smaller” ones He does in my life: all He has done to call me to Himself, to keep me close, to save me, to sanctify me, to bless me. We renew our will to collaborate with His grace, to listen to His voice, to use well the means of salvation, to resist sin, to persevere in good. This is also the moment to pray for all those we want or have to pray for. God is present on the Altar! We offer Him everything!