

Liturgical Catechesis; Homily 6  
“The Structure of the Eucharistic Prayer”

We’ve now looked at the larger picture of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. The taking, breaking and giving are almost all simply physical actions. The blessing, the prayer of giving thanks, isn’t so clear. We don’t know how elaborate or how simple Jesus’ own prayer of blessing at the Last Supper was. We only know that he took bread and blessed it and that he took a cup and gave thanks.

We do know from St. Paul, as we read last week, that this prayer probably contained a reference to the Lord’s own actions of taking, blessing, breaking and giving - called “the institution narrative.” The blessing was also probably set in connection to his saving death and resurrection, or as St. Paul says, “on the night he was betrayed.” And we also know from St. Justin (about 150 AD), that “the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying Amen.” Thus, it seems that the actual words of the blessing were left to the one who presided over the taking, blessing, breaking and giving.

However, very early in the Church’s history, there was a move to make these prayers of blessing more uniform. [Let’s face it, some people’s “best of their ability” isn’t as eloquent as other people’s “best”] By the year 400, there was a broadly accepted pattern of praying.

Rather than trace the history of this blessing, which is rather well documented, I simply want to explain those chief elements or common structures as they exist today - to list them: a short thanksgiving (the preface), a singing God’s praises in the Holy Holy Holy (sanctus), an invocation of the Holy Spirit (the epiclesis), the words of the Lord (the institution narrative), a memorial (anamnesis) and offering, some intercessions, and a final doxology. Every Eucharistic Prayer has these basic parts; some more obviously, some more ornately.

To begin, there is a dialogue to tell you that we are about to do something important. [The Lord be with you. And also with you.]. Echoing the scriptural greetings of St. Paul, it is a wish, a prayer for Christ to be with you - not a statement of fact - which you reciprocate to me. [Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.] Then there is an invitation to focus your hearts on God, to leave behind the distractions of this world for a short time. You state that you are focused. [Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give him thanks and praise.] Then, in a sense, the priest asks if we are ready to pray - to give thanks and praise to God for what he has done for us. And you, the people of God, give me a “green light” to continue, in some way, you’re saying that it is right to God thanks and praise because we are focused and believe the Lord is with us.

Then, there is a PREFACE or a short prayer of thanksgiving, a brief reminder of why we are thankful. Following this thanksgiving, we unite our voices with all the choirs of heaven and earth who are singing God’s praises as described in the scriptures (SANCTUS, Latin for “holy”). Thus, this song is a compilation from:

- Rev 4:8** “Day and night without ceasing, they sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty -
- Isaiah 6:3** “And one called to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,”
- Mt 21:9** “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

The prayer then has an EPICLESIS or invocation of the Holy Spirit and a recounting of the institution narrative. In a sense, these are reminders to us that it is not by our own power that this happens. We rely upon what Christ commanded us to do and the power of Holy Spirit to accomplish it. Thus, we ask God to send the Holy Spirit upon our bread and wine, so that it might be changed into the Lord’s body and blood. AND we ask God to send down the Holy Spirit upon us, so that we who receive the Lord’s body and blood, might be changed into members of his body.

Usually, after the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine but before the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon us, we recall the Lord’s own words or INSTITUTION NARRATIVE. We recall the words that have been handed down throughout the ages to us - “that on the night he was betrayed, he took bread... Thus, “the institution narrative, by the power of the words and action of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, make sacramentally present under the species of bread and wine Christ’s body and blood, his sacrifice offered on the cross once for all” (no. 1353).

In accord with Christ’s command to do this in memory of him, the prayer remembers Christ’s saving death and resurrection (c.f., ANAMNESIS). As Hebrews tell us, Christ’s saving death and resurrection is a one-time event; he died once and for all (Heb 10:10). Knowing his time was near, Christ establishes a memorial of his one-time saving death and resurrection; he said, “do this in memory of me.” St. Paul recalls, “for as often you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11: 26). In other words, Christ’s saving death and resurrection, is celebrated - not repeated - it is a memorial. But, the Holy Spirit makes the saving power of this mystery, which took place at one moment in human history, present to us in this day and age - to every place and time where the Lord’s death is proclaimed, where this memorial is celebrated (no. 1104)!

Thus, You’ll hear it in phrases like “in memory of his death and resurrection” (ii) or “calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation” (iii) or “we recall Christ’s death” (iv).

The only caution here is that it is a memorial - a memorial of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, done “in memory of me.” However, it is also a “real” memorial, not solely a symbolic memorial. In other words, “do this” or take, bless, break and give bread as I have done with you here tonight and solely upon my authority, which you have witnessed throughout my ministry, accept on faith when I tell you that “this is my body... this is my blood.”

We believe that Christ makes the power of his saving sacrifice available to us in the here and now. It is not a “new” sacrifice or some type of “repetition.” It is a mystical participation in the one saving sacrifice of Calvary, which we offer back to God (the OFFERING). More often than not, you’ll actually hear the words, “... we offer you... .” But keep in mind that we are also called to unite ourselves with Christ, so that we surrender ourselves to God. Thus, all our hardships and sufferings - the death of a loved ones, a battle with addiction, our efforts to exercise and eat right, our search for job, our time spent praying for others.., in a word, all our spiritual sacrifices - are connected with Christ’s sacrifice and become acceptable in him.

Believing we are a priestly people by our baptism into Christ, we also offer prayers - or intercessions - for a variety of peoples. We pray for unity in the Church, for the Pope, for our bishop, and for all the bishops and clergy. We pray for the dead and pray that we might join the fellowship of saints, when our day comes.

And finally, the praise of God, which is beyond any listing, is expressed in the final doxology. It gives all glory and honor to God the Father. We believe that we offer God the Father this glory and honor through Christ, because he is the way to the Father. We also offer the Father honor and glory with Christ, because we are a priestly people redeemed by his blood. And, we also offer the Father honor and glory in Christ, because we are members of his body.

Your assent to these things - that God is deserving of our thanks, that God is the most holy, that by the power of the Spirit Christ gives us himself so that we might be united as his body, that we remember Christ’s death and resurrection, that we offer ourselves, that we intercede for ourselves and others, and that all glory and honor belongs to God in Christ - should be resounding. In fact, it is called “the Great Amen.” It should shake the walls and rattle windows. As St. Augustine says and the catechism reiterates,

If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrifice that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are, you respond Amen (yes, it is true) and by responding to it, you assent to it. For you hear the words, “the body of Christ” and respond Amen. Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. (c.f., no. 1396)