

IN CHRIST WE GIVE THANKS -HOMILY ON THE MASS III

Preparation of the Gifts & the Eucharistic Prayer

February 13 & 20, 2011

In recent weeks, we have been reflecting on Christ's presence and action at Mass to us, in us, through us, and for us. First, in Christ's presence in the community in the Introductory Rites as he gathers us together to celebrate the Eucharist. And then of His presence in the Liturgy of the Word as He speaks to us in the Scriptures. Today, let's reflect on Christ's presence and action in the person of the priest as we offer the Sacrifice of Christ.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the Preparation of the altar and gifts. Bread and wine, along with the offerings of the people are presented to the priest, the minister through whom Christ will lead us in making our sacrifice. Short prayers of blessing – that is, praising and thanking God– are prayed over the bread and wine. The priest washes his hands, asking for purity of heart so that this most holy action may be done worthily, and then he invites the people to pray that the action we are about to do may be acceptable to God.

After a short prayer asking God's blessing on us and our prayer, we get to the heart of what Christ means for us to do when He commanded at the Last Supper "Do this in memory of me." Each week we remember that Christ took bread and wine, blessed it, broke the bread, and gave these gifts to his disciples as a remembrance of his love to death for them, as food to nourish them and as a foretaste of his eternal kingdom.

What Jesus did at the Last Supper he does for us at every Mass. We have taken the bread and wine and now He blesses it in a great prayer of thanksgiving, the Eucharistic prayer. (*Eucharist* is Greek for thanksgiving.) I have always thought that this great prayer is the most under-appreciated of all our prayers. Too often it is thought of as simply the "recipe to get Jesus present in the bread and wine" but it is so much more than that. In this prayer, Christ, acting in the person of the priest, leads us in the most profound act of thanksgiving, in the greatest offering we can give to the Father, in the greatest affirmation of our baptismal commitment. Let us listen to what is prayed:

"Lift up your hearts."

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God"

"Father, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks."

These words from us can only be prayed from the heart if we reflect upon why we are grateful, and why we are grateful unfolds in the prayer in the sentences that follow. These words change from week to week as we proclaim to the Father why we are so grateful – in Advent, for fulfilling the promises of the prophets, in Christmas season for the gift of His Son, in Lent for calling us back to Him in Easter for the victory over sin

and death, in Ordinary Time for the many gifts of creation and redemption he has bestowed upon us.

Gratitude, by its nature, expresses our dependence upon another, and our thankful remembering of what God has done for us expresses our dependence upon Him. Our hearts filled with joy for what God has done for us move us to proclaim the holiness of God, which permeates all of heaven and earth, and proclaims the greatness of the One God has sent, Christ the Lord:

Holy, Holy Holy ...
heaven and earth are filled with your glory.
Blessed is He who comes.

We continue with elated hearts praising and thanking God, and we ask that his Holy Spirit come upon the bread and wine so that it becomes the perfect gift we can offer to the Father in our act of thanking him.

Then our remembering the deeds of the Lord comes to its climax as we recall the core act that has saved us from the slavery of sin and the grasp of death: the act of Christ giving His life for our lives. Recalling that Last Supper with Christ's command to eat and drink not simply the Passover bread and wine, but His own Body *given for us* and His own blood *poured out for us*, we proclaim the true nature of Christ's death: not primarily an execution, but the act of self-giving to the bitter end so that we might have a new beginning of life in Christ, free from sin and death.

In this remembrance, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the word of Christ spoken by the priest marvelous things occur. The one Sacrifice of Calvary and Christ's glorious resurrection are made present to us, as fresh and as effective as on that first Good Friday and Easter morning. The bread and wine, simple gifts of creation and human work become Christ himself, so that we may offer the most fitting gift to our Father and receive from the Father the only food that nourishes us to eternal life.

In gratitude we offer Christ, crucified and risen. But here is the catch: we have been united to Christ by our baptism – remember St. Paul's words in the epistle to the Galatians: "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Christ offered his life to His Father by dying on the cross; we offer to the Father by living each day in Christ. The offering of ourselves in Christ is truly a gift to the Father, but is also the Father's gift to us, since only in Christ can we find grace and salvation; only in Christ can we find eternal life.

Then we ask God to send His Spirit upon us so that we may truly be one with Christ, and one with each other in Christ, for it is only in the unity of God's family that God is truly honored and adored.

We ask for blessings upon the Church that we may truly be Christ's presence and instruments of grace in the world; we pray for eternal life for all who have died, and ultimately for ourselves, since eternal life in Christ is our true destiny.

The priest, in words that proclaim that all from us is offered through, with, and in Christ, give praise and glory to the Father in the unity of Holy Spirit. God's people, gathered in Christ, having heard Christ speak, and led by Him in this great act of thanksgiving ring out their "Amen" – the Hebrew word for "so be it" – "I agree" – "I am part of this action." With this word we acknowledge that what has been proclaimed by the one voice of the priest is owned by all who prayed along in silence.

This great prayer brings about the glorification of God in a profound act of gratitude, it brings forth the one Sacrifice of Calvary which forgives our sins, and it draws us into the only fitting offering to our God, that of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. This prayer, prayed under the leadership of Christ our High Priest in the person of his ordained minister, draws us to this holy altar, not just to offer, but to receive.

In a few minutes, we will go to the altar to do what we have reflected upon. May we approach the altar with a clearer vision and deeper appreciation of what unfolds before us.

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