

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. The Eucharistic Prayer #14

Many U.S. Catholics who grew up in what we today often refer to as the “pre-Vatican II Church” have memories of our “Sunday habits,” some of which may not have been all that praiseworthy.

“When are you late for Mass?” was probably the most frequently asked question, and it may have been a search for a simple and convenient answer. The answer often given was the “bottom line” answer; you must be present for the Offertory, the Consecration and Communion.

That answer could give one the impression that other parts of the Mass were considered less important, particularly the Liturgy of the Word, the opening rites, the proclamation of the scriptures, the homily, etc. What was important was the Consecration and Communion.

Today, we would insist that the entire Mass, although it is divided between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is a united whole; the entire Liturgy is important. If one is not present today for the entrance or processional song, we are already considered “late.” If we leave before our

sisters and brothers have received communion with us, we have “left early.”

That is not to say, of course, that the Consecration is unimportant. Rather, it is part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Let us say something, therefore, about that part of our Roman liturgy which includes the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite.

The first question to ask is this: What did Christ say and do at the Last Supper? The answer is simple: On the night before he died, at supper with his apostles, Christ took the bread, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you.” Likewise he took the cup of wine, blessed it and shared it with his disciples saying, “Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you. . . .” (from Eucharistic Prayer II)

Over the centuries, of course, indeed from the earliest times, the Church has added prayers around the institution narrative. However, the basic structure of the Eucharistic Prayer remains: take, give thanks, break and

share.

Since Vatican II we have been much more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in the act of consecration with the inclusion in the Eucharistic Prayer of the invocation of the Spirit to come upon these gifts to make them holy and to change them to the Body and Blood of Christ.

After the passing of the bread and cup, Christ admonished the disciples to “do this in memory of me.” This memory, however, is not of just a meal shared. It is joined to the sacrifice the next day of his person on the cross. This death was the fulfillment of his promise that the bread was his body given for us and his blood shed for us. And this death was to accomplish our salvation, to redeem us from sin and render us worthy to share eternal happiness in heaven.

The Eucharistic Prayer, therefore, is a prayer of praise and thanks to God for the work of our salvation and especially for the gift and sacrifice of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The offerings of bread and wine, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. And we pray that we will be transformed into Christ’s Body and Blood for the life of the world.

However, we must say that it often seems as though we do not pray together with the presider at the Eucharistic Prayer. It appears to the assembly that this is the “priest’s prayer,” inasmuch as the priest by himself prays the words.

If we pay careful attention to the words, however, it will become clear that

the priest prays on behalf of all of us. Listen, for instance, to the number of times the word “we” is repeated in the Eucharistic Prayer: “We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving.” “We offer these gifts for your holy Catholic Church.” “Remember all of us gathered here before you.” “We offer you this sacrifice of praise.” “We celebrate the memory of Christ your Son.” “For ourselves too we ask some share in the fellowship of the saints.”

It is clear that we are all included in the prayer of the priest. It is not a time for us to sit back and wait for it all to be finished. Our active listening is important as is our active participation in the dialogue with the priest. Our “Amen” is our “yes” to all that is said and done.

We would consider ourselves “late” if we came into the theater at the beginning of the second act. We are sure to be present for the opening kickoff of a football game. We follow the playbill and the scoreboard in order to participate. Then why come to Mass late? Just as it would also be considered rude to leave before the final act or the concluding whistle, so it is with the Liturgy. It asks for our “full, conscious and active participation in this sacrificial meal.