

The Following are weekly reflections aimed to instruct the faithful further on the issue of “what happens at the mass.” These reflections should be printed in the weekly bulletin for all to read, as well as read aloud during the reflective time before mass in order to help assist the faithful in more fully immersing themselves in the liturgy.

Liturgy Matters #1

From the time of the apostles, the Christian community celebrated the rites of Baptism and the Eucharist in obedience to the Lord’s commands (Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:19). From the as early as the second century, these rites were referred to as “Mysteries.” The roots to this lie in the theology of St. Paul, who used the word “mystery” as a key concept in his whole understanding of what happened in Christ. For St. Paul, the central mystery is the Cross of Christ. He does so to express that something was hidden in the cross which we cannot understand without its being revealed. As he explains in the second chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians, when “the rulers of this age” crucified Christ, they did not understand who he was, for his true identity was hidden. But in fact the rulers of this age crucified “the Lord of Glory.” This is because, as he said, “None of the rulers of this age knew the mystery. If they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 7-8). If we use a phrase like “the Mystery of the Eucharist,” this does not mean that which cannot be understood about the Eucharist. It means that the Eucharist is a concrete something in which a divine reality is hidden. If we use the word in the singular, “Mystery of the Eucharist,” it refers to the rite as a whole. The Eucharist was and is called “The Mysteries,” and here the reference is to the various dimensions working together. The gestures, the words, the bread and wine, the members of the assembly in their various roles, all of these are mysteries. In them is hidden the Lord of Glory.

Liturgy Matters #2

The Mass begins long before it begins. Much has gone into its preparation, and the actual beginning of the liturgical ceremony is a culmination of many graces mysteriously at work in the lives of hundreds and even thousands of people. I am not talking about turning on the lights of the building and opening the doors, preparing the vessels and vestments, and getting the music sorted out. I am talking about the deep theological significance hidden in the arrival of many people coming from many places into one place to celebrate the Eucharist. I am talking about the mystery of the assembly. The Mass begins as the assembly forms, and this is already full of meaning. In the coming together of many people into one place to pray under the headship of their bishop or a priest, we have an acting out in a very concrete way of what the Church is and is meant to be. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which literally means “a calling out” and “a calling together.” So, church means those called out from somewhere by God and called together into one place by Him. Every time we use the word church, we should try to remember this sense of the word. The Church is the gathering of those called by God; she is an assembly that God forms and keeps together. The whole Church has gathered, the Church in heaven and on earth, the Church across the world and across the centuries. The Mass prepared from the beginning of the world is about to begin. The meaning of the whole creation and the whole of human history is contained here in ritual form and in the people who enact the ritual. This action will cause the Church to be: to do Eucharist is to be Church. To be Church, to be assembled into one, is what God intends for the world. The Eucharist is celebrated in thanksgiving and for the glory of God, and it is done for the salvation of the whole world.

Liturgy Matters #3

As we begin our journey through the mass, it is important to recognize in this journey, the realization of an “ideal mass,” that is, one in which all the elements of the liturgy come together. We cannot get tangled up in questions of a practical nature concerning how well or how poorly a particular celebration happens. If we have had bad experiences of liturgical celebrations, where the ritual is performed poorly or not as envisioned by the Church, we should set that aside at present, (and at each time we begin a new mass) and imagine the liturgy as it is meant to be celebrated, with every person and every part working at the highest level. So, we must imagine a “big” liturgy; that is, a Sunday or even a major feast, where a large number of people has assembled for the celebration. From the beginning, Sunday has been the preeminent day for Christians to gather together in prayer, since on Sunday Christ rose from the dead, and every Sunday celebrates his Resurrection by the celebration of Eucharist. The Sunday celebration inevitably marks the whole day, making a day completely given over to prayer, to rest in God, to the joy of our communion with one another, to the joy of our salvation. Keeping this in mind, we must stop to consider our attitude after mass when we leave the church. Do we continue to greet everyone with this joy? Are we patient and even charitable in the parking lot as we leave? Do we offer the day for the glory of God? This is the ideal, and we should protect it from cultural encroachments and lifestyles that undermine such a sense of Sunday. Having roughly established a mindset for entering the mystery of the mass, we will begin to examine the role of the bishop or priest and then move on to the rite itself.

Liturgy Matters #4

In imagining our ideal celebration, we should also include the bishop as the one who presides at the liturgy. Even though our usual experience is with a priest presiding, we must understand that behind every priest is the bishop who ordained him and sent him to a particular community to lead the Eucharistic celebration. In what God has arranged for His people, there is really only one priest, Christ himself. Those whom we call bishops and priests represent the one and only priest, Christ himself. They are mysteries or sacraments; that is, concrete people in whom a divine reality is hidden. In the case of mass, they are the reality of Christ as priest. The bishop is head of a diocesan church; he is its leader and its chief authority. But he is not this as an individual person, the lucky guy who gets to be in charge. He represents Christ as head, Christ the leader, Christ the community’s only authority. Likewise then, a priest is not a free-floating agent, the lucky guy who gets to be in charge in a parish setting. He represents the bishop, who represents Christ as head of the community. It is important to remember, however, that Christ shares his priesthood with all the baptized. If the bishop or priest at the head of the Eucharistic assembly is meant to be a sign of the one priesthood of Christ, all his words and actions during the rite are geared toward uniting the people with him in what he is doing. Precisely in the Mass Christ wishes to unite all his people with himself in his priestly act of offering himself to the Father for the sake of the world. In this sense all of Christ’s people are priests, not because they represent his one and only priesthood as bishops and priests do, but because they are united with him in his priestly act.

Liturgy Matters **#5**

As the liturgy begins, the assembly that God has called together rises to its feet and begins to sing. The beauty of song is not insignificant for understanding what is happening. The song represents the beauty of the one faith in the many Christians throughout the world. In the one song, all the voices join together in unity, every voice with its own timbre, own quality, in tune, or out of tune, blend into one beautiful sound and one beautiful voice: the voice of the Church. We must also recognize that this song does not only represent the assembly joined together in our particular building, but also the entire Church including the countless number of angels raising their voices in song as well. The human capacity to sing is truly wonderful. Human song is an image of the mystery of the Incarnation. Air in our body, in a throat, pushing the intelligible voice outward in beautiful expression is an image of Spirit in the flesh, of divinity joined to humanity.

While the song is being sung, a procession of the various ministers of the liturgy moves through the church and into the sanctuary. At the culminating point of this procession is the bishop or priest, rendering visible and concrete for us what our fleshly eyes cannot see; namely, Christ himself as the head of our assembly and the one who leads us in prayer. Christ is coming and standing in the midst of his people and of course the people rise to their feet and of course they are singing a joyful song with one voice. The other ministers accompany the priest in the procession, all signifying the difference in their roles. Some carry flame, another carries the smoking incense. When the flame and incense enter, the heavenly choirs of angels enter the sanctuary with them; and they will help us to worship. They will pray for us and with us. They will protect us because they love us. In the procession the deacon carries the book of the Gospels which shows us that Christ is coming together with his word. In what is about to happen, he will speak words of power and wisdom, a transforming word that will change our lives and form us into the likeness of himself.

Liturgy Matters **#6**

While the assembly is still singing, the priest circles the altar with incense as a sign of reverencing the holy table around which and on which all that is about to happen is concentrated. "Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel" (Rev. 8:3-4).

After the song has ended and all are gathered in their places, the first thing the priest does and says is the sign of the cross, signing his body with the cross and saying the words "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." All of the people likewise sign themselves and answer, "Amen." The sign expresses in one summary gesture the central event of Christian faith. We trace it over our bodies as a way of indicating that that event shall make its force felt on our very bodies. The phrase "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" comes from the risen Lord himself who commanded his 11 disciples to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." He adds the promise, "And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world"(Matt. 28:19-20). As the centuries advanced and Christians continued to reflect on the tremendous mystery hidden in this deceptively simple formula, some theologians could not help but marvel at and enjoy the paradox of the word *name* in the singular and the three names Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The one God has only one name, but that name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the full name of God. To place this sign and the holy name of God at the beginning of the Mass is actually the only possible way to begin.

Liturgy Matters

#7

The next part of the mass is the apostolic greeting. Here the priest greets the people with the phrase: "The Lord be with you." All the people greet the priest in return, saying, "And with your spirit." These are not meant to be exchanges of what might occur between just any large group gathered and one who stands up in front with something to say to everyone and so begins with a "Good morning" or "Good evening." This is an exchange uniquely belonging to the Christian community and peculiar to this moment in the community's life when it begins to celebrate the source and summit of its life. It is an exchange that immediately acknowledges the roles that will be played in this ritual action. The priest greets the people not as an individual; rather he greets them in his sacramental role of representing Christ at the head of his body, as Christ who will lead his body in prayer. This is called the apostolic greeting because the words come from greetings which the apostle Paul used in his letters. The apostles for their part passed this on to their successors, the bishops; and bishops share their apostolic ministry of leadership with priests. This greeting is to remind us that the faith in which we stand comes to us from the apostles.

If the priest's greeting to the people is on such an exalted level, the people's response is no less highly pitched. They answer, "And with your spirit." This response is not meant to say something to the effect of "the same to you." It means much more. The people are addressing the "spirit" of the priest; that is, that deepest interior part of his being where he has been ordained precisely to lead the people in this sacred action. They are saying in effect, "Be the priest for us now," aware that there is only one priest, Christ himself, and that this one person who represents him now must be finely tuned to perform his sacred duties as well. Only in the dignified courtesy of this exchange between the priest and people can we begin this liturgy, for the exchange expresses and establishes the unique harmony between ourselves, the priest, and the Church throughout the world.

Liturgy Matters

#8

Following the apostolic greeting is the penitential rite, that is, the acknowledgment of our sins, "so that we may celebrate these sacred mysteries worthily." To better understand the inspired word of God that is about to be read, we must first confess our sins before him and ask for mercy, so that our minds, heart, and souls may be open to hearing the wisdom of the scriptures. We must draw near to the word and the altar with repentance. There are different formulas the priest may use for this, but most common is the communal prayer, The Confiteor. What is beautiful in this prayer is that in it we not only confess our sins to God but also to one another, in addition, we ask Mary and all the angels and saints to pray for us. By so praying we are immediately brought into an awareness that the liturgy is not about just me and God. All of us together come into His presence, together with angels and saints, and we ask Him to show us His mercy and grant us His salvation. It bears repeating, insistence, even a kind of stammering: "Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

Next, the Gloria is sung. We are singing now for the same reason that the angels first sang; namely, that God has sent His Son among us born in our same flesh. In the first part of the song our words are addressed to God the Father, then we address Jesus Christ Himself, acknowledging him first as "only Son of the Father." Then we cry out to him as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And so in the midst of our praise we beg him again for mercy. This hymn is meant to be an outburst of joy and praise with the additional wonder that the liturgy of the Word is about to begin, that God is about to share with us His wisdom through the scriptures.

Liturgy Matters

#9

After the Gloria is what we now call the opening prayer. In the past, this prayer was referred to as the "collect". The priest solemnly invites the people, "Let us pray". Of course, we have been praying from the start, so this invitation means to signal a shift of levels, prayer with a different kind of attention. After a short pause for silence, the priest stretches his hands and says a prayer whose purpose is to "collect" into a few short lines, all the strands of what has taken place so far, as well as all the strands of our many individual thoughts. Therefore, this collect effectively places us all together into one succinctly expressed address to God the Father.

The prayer is addressed to Him and is always structured according to the same pattern, according to a very ancient usage. It helps to be attentive and listen for this pattern. God is first addressed, using one or more of His many titles. Next, we remember before God what God has done, not because He has forgotten, but because remembering is from biblical times a fundamental form of prayer. Next, on the basis of what is remembered, we ask for something in the present, for ourselves and for the whole church and world. When we remember what God has done in the past, we have the courage and reason to hope for what we ask for in the present. In the final move of this pattern of prayer, all that we ask the Father is asked "through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever". In the pattern of the opening prayer, we have the shape or pattern of prayer that will mark all the praying of the Mass. All the prayers are addressed to God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This is the shape of our prayer; this is the pattern of our movement within the divine life of the Trinity. To this prayer all the people say, "Amen".

Liturgy Matters

#10

Now begins the first major part of the liturgy: the Liturgy of the Word. So, the "Word of God" in the Liturgy of the Word does not mean the words of the Bible considered merely as words like our words, it is far more. The Word of God is an event: the event of creation and the event of what God is doing and saying in Israel and finally the event of what God is doing and saying in Jesus. The words of the Bible narrate the event. They are precious means to us, for they are given by the Holy Spirit. As such, they carry far more than mere human words can carry. They carry the very events of which they speak, and in their formulation is revealed the mystery of the event. In the proclamation of these words, the event proclaimed becomes present.

No matter what particular readings occur in a given liturgy, the Liturgy of the Word always has about it an event character; that is, the events of the past that are proclaimed become event for the believing community that hears them told. And all the events of the scripture find their center in the one event that is the center of them all: the death and Resurrection of Jesus. It is this about which all the scriptures speak. This is not talk delivering ideas and concepts. It is, as I say, an event: the same event in which God once acted to save His people delivered now to this assembly by means of the scriptures, the gift of the Spirit to the Church.

Liturgy Matters

#11

We can now turn to the form and order of the ritual in which the Word is proclaimed at Mass. All that we have said in these recent weeks is given concrete form by what we read, how we read, who reads, and the order in which we read. This form and order express that the center of what is proclaimed is the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The spreading out of many scriptural texts throughout the liturgical year repeats in our community's experience and understanding what the Church in each generation discovers with awe and wonder: that the meaning of the whole creation and the whole of human history is revealed in the mystery of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The scriptures are read in a certain order, an order that follows the order of salvation history; that is, the liturgy begins with a text from the Old Testament, where creation and the history of Israel are recounted, and moves toward the climax of the proclamation of the Gospel. This is the order of the Liturgy of the Word because the Gospel is the climax and center of the scripture or put more comprehensively: because Christ himself is the fulfillment of creation and the history of Israel. Thus, for a Christian, only from the perspective of the Gospel is the Old Testament text understood in its fullness, or again: only in Christ are creation and the history of Israel understood. Some reading from the writings of the apostles forms a link between Gospel and Old Testament, a contemplative insight, a theological insight that helps bind the event of the Gospel to the event of the Old Testament. We are not talking about specific sets of texts as found in the Lectionary for the celebration of a given day, where this connection is sometimes more, sometimes less clear, as the case may be. The point is a general one about this structure in the liturgy. However, once the theological significance of this structure is grasped, "the structure is a mystery!" profound and unexpected connections can emerge between the texts that will not appear when the texts are simply read side by side as texts.

Liturgy Matters

#12

Now it is time to discuss the "First Reading". I have said that the Gospel is the center of the Liturgy of the Word. This claim has its roots in the Old Testament, and on a most basic level, it is a careful reading of the text as a whole, which leads us to make such a claim. The Old Testament, which is used in the first reading, is a vast collection of theological traditions developed during well over a thousand years. Yet, despite the differences of the many human circumstances and authors that are reflected there, it is not difficult for the one who reads with faith to see that the collection as a whole leads to a center. When a passage of this collection is read at Mass, now in virtue of Jesus' Resurrection, that original event becomes the event of the community that hears it. That is, the Christian community hears it with the insight lent it by the presence of the risen Lord. What happens at Mass during the reading of the Old Testament passage was expressed already in the Gospel of Luke where the story of the risen Lord's appearance to the two disciples along the road to Emmaus is recounted. "How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced!" and again later, "Jesus said, Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms had to be fulfilled."

In addition to the context of the first reading, we should also take into account the one who is asked to read the passage. More is happening here than just a sense of "somebody has to do this", so we chose one of the baptized. Even as we listen to the reading, we should marvel at the grace that enables one of us to stand up and be used as an instrument through which the holy and life-giving Word of God is announced in the assembly. At the end of the proclamation of the passage, the reader bluntly declares what it is that we have just heard: "The word of the Lord". We, as the body of Christ, express orally what is in our hearts, "Thanks be to God!"

Liturgy Matters

#13

Silence is our first response to the word we have just heard in the First Reading. The silence of the assembly at this point is the same about which we read in the heavenly liturgy described in the book of Revelation: "When the Lamb broke open the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about thirty minutes"(Rev. 8:1). Of course, we do not remain silent for thirty minutes, but it is prudent to allow several moments of silence to reflect on the First Reading.

In response to this silence, we use the words of the psalms. We do so because this was Israel's hymnbook and so was the prayer book of Jesus himself in his earthly life. The psalms were produced and then prayed throughout all the various epochs and phases of Israel's existence. They express joy and wonder, gratitude and repentance, pleas for help, mercy, and protection. The words written in the psalms were fulfilled by Jesus as he prayed them during the course of his life. Verse by verse, psalm by psalm, they were a mystery, hidden but now revealed in him.

Because there is a change in direction between the reading and the psalm; that is, God speaking to us in the Word and then us speaking to God in the responsorial psalm, we see also a different person signing the psalm. (The cantor) As the assembly repeats the same words of the cantor, they also share with Christ the prayer sung to the Father. This "joining" with Christ in the psalm, praying to the Father, we once again see the richness of the liturgy as a communal and integral part of our unity with Christ as our response to the Father. This is as St. Paul once exclaimed, "Whatever promises God has made have been fulfilled in him; therefore it is through him that we address our Amen to God when we worship together" (Corinthians 2:20). When Jesus rises again, his way of praying rises with him and becomes in the liturgy his praying in us.

Liturgy Matters

#14

Much of what has been said about the reading of the Word of God from the Old Testament can be applied to the second reading, always taken from one of the letters of the apostles. The direction of movement shifts again. God speaks again to His Church, and the Church listens. But now God's language is no longer the creation and the history of Israel. He speaks to us through the reflective writings of the Lord's chosen apostles. The way in which the writers provide us with these reflections demonstrate the center of our theology; the reflective effort of the first believers to absorb all that had been experienced in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The writers unfold the consequences, showing us in various ways that the believer is summoned to an unimaginably profound sharing in the Lord's Passion and so in his victory. The texts, as we know, are inspired; that is, through them the Holy Spirit leads us to the understanding of Jesus' death and Resurrection that God intends. So, at mass when the writings of the apostles are proclaimed the assembly is led in that moment to a grasping of the mystery. The understanding of the writings in the context of the mass is what God is now saying to His people, so naturally the reader concludes with "The Word of the Lord". In our gratitude we respond, "Thanks be to God". As was the case after the first reading, our most basic response is one of silence that expresses our reverence for the fact that God has spoken. In this silence once again, in the new content delivered and grasped in this reading, Jesus Christ himself is opening the minds and hearts of His people to a better understanding of the mysteries.

Liturgy Matters

#15

We do not sing a psalm in response to the Second Reading. Instead, after a short silence, we stand and sing not once, but many times, the word that is most closely associated with the Lord's Resurrection: Alleluia! It is a shout of praise. We sing this word now because in the proclamation of the Gospel our risen Lord intensifies his presence in this assembly.

At this moment, the priest or deacon approaches the altar and lifts the book of the Gospels from their place on the altar in a procession to the lectern where the Gospel will be proclaimed. Through the priest or deacon, the transcendent Lord speaks directly to his Church. The Gospel is always read by a deacon or a priest or by the bishop himself if there are no other ordained ministers present at the Eucharist where he presides. This is a ritual "rule", which alerts us to the fact that Christ himself is now speaking directly to his assembled Church. Further, the bishop is a successor to the apostles. He ordains deacons to proclaim the Gospel, and this mission remains in those deacons whom he later ordains as priests. Reserving the proclamation of the Gospel to the ordained reminds us that the Gospel expresses apostolic faith in a preeminent way.

I have said that when Jesus rises from the dead, everything he ever said and did rises with him. By means of the reading of some particular passage from the Gospel text, there is delivered to the community some portion, so to speak, of what has risen with Jesus. The Gospels, too, are apostolic texts, and so all that we have said about the faith that comes to us through the apostles applies also to our listening to and accepting what we hear in the Gospel reading. We want to recall here what we have said about being attentive to the direction in which the liturgy is moving. We can see in the proclamation of the Gospel an intensification and a climax of the movement of God the Father toward the world. And we have help in this, the Holy Spirit ensures that Jesus Christ sinks down, way down, into the community which stands in reverence, awe, and wonder listening to the Gospel. We cry out to the very one who is now present among us: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!"

Liturgy Matters

#16

The Gospel is followed by the homily, and like the Gospel, the homily is reserved for the ordained. This is not to say that lay people might not be just as insightful about the meaning of the scriptures. What must be understood is that this is not the time for personal insight or for the spinning out of individual theories and stories. That one of the ordained is preaching is meant to be a guarantee in the assembly that what is heard is the Church's apostolic faith and not merely the private thoughts and experiences of an individual. Once again, we reflect on the direction of the liturgy when we consider the homily. It is the preacher's responsibility to listen with special care to all that is said in the now of today's liturgy by means of the particular texts that have been proclaimed. Based on this careful listening, he will propose to the assembly ways of ensuring that God's word finds its home in our hearts and that we respond to it as we ought. Therefore, in one sense the word is coming into him, in another sense it is coming out of him. Jesus expressed this pattern precisely when he said, "My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me" (John 7:16).

After another brief moment of silence when the homily is concluded, we as the Church, recite the Profession of Faith. The Creed is a summary of the Church's way of reading scriptures, and consequently it is a summary of the Church's faith. It is not something in addition to scripture; it is the scripture reduced to a single page. All of our understanding and beliefs concerning the scriptures summed up in the words we speak. The Creed has its origins in the liturgy of Baptism, where, before adults were baptized in the name of the Trinity, they had first to profess faith in the Holy Trinity. Belief in the Holy Trinity is not a belief in an idea about God. It is belief in the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that is, belief in the divine life revealed to us in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, as this is preached and known in the Church that comes from the apostles.

Liturgy Matters

#17

The last part of the Liturgy of the Word is what is called the prayer of the faithful or general intercessions. These are called prayers of the faithful because it is the responsibility of the baptized persons who live in the world to bring before God in prayer the needs of the Church and the whole world. It is precisely their life in the world, enlightened and shaped by what they have heard today in the Word of God that equips these people with knowledge of what to pray for. The prayers are also called general intercessions, or sometimes even universal prayers, as an indication of the direction in which our prayer ought to go. These petitions should be very broad, all embracing. Individuals can pray for their particular needs in the quiet of their hearts. Here the Church is giving voice to her relationship with the whole world. If particular communities do not manage to think in their prayers beyond their own border and interests, it is a limited sense of Church that is being expressed. In the community that reflects Christ's own expansive heart, we pray first of all for the Church, but for the Church precisely so that she can be holy and pleasing to God and a sacrament of salvation for the world. Second, we must pray for the world, above all that the world may know the salvation offered in Christ and, short of that, that sufferings and hardships be relieved, that injustices be redressed. Many other intentions are included, speaking mostly for other special intentions that involve the Church, but lastly, we pray for the faithful departed who are in need of our prayers just as much as we are in need of theirs.

The Liturgy of the Word culminates as the gifts are brought before the altar in preparation of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We include all the prayers presently spoken and include them with the bread and wine as the Church brings both herself and the world forward to be placed in Christ's hands for transformation.

Liturgy Matters

#18

The procession of the gifts offers us one of the strongest opportunities for understanding the relation between the sacrifice of the Christian people and the sacrifice of Christ. It is true that bread and wine have their precise meaning in the context of the Passover and in the Lord's Last Supper and that bread and wine are involved here in obedience to his command to do this in memory of him. However, we can reflect as well on the fittingness of the Lord's choice and what the Spirit had prepared. Bread and wine are extremely strong symbols, powerful and rich in what they express. We are not animals that snatch food from the ground or from trees with our mouths, roaming about alone until our stomachs are full enough to get us through the next round. We produce our food together, we consume it together, and we share it with one another. It is an expression of love and desire. It aims at communion. Food is both a substance needed to stay alive, and a symbol needed to stay human.

As these gifts are collected from outside the church and brought into the church, finally brought down the aisle to the hands of the bishop or priest, there is articulated in this ritual action, the relation between the order of the ordained priesthood and the order of the baptized. In seeing this we see articulated also the global relationship between Church and world, between Church and all creation, between Church and all history. Through the work of the baptized in the world, the Church brings to the hands of Christ the fruits of creation and the work of human hands. This is an exercise of the priesthood and the faithful. We bring our lives—with all our efforts to produce and to be together in love, with all our desire and our willingness to share—and we place them in the hands of Christ by placing them in the hands of the bishop or priest. Basically, the action is our saying to Christ, "Do something with this. Make our lives be what your life was and is."

Liturgy Matters

#19

After the procession of the gifts, the altar is prepared and the bread and wine are placed on it. The priest comes to the altar, picks up the bread, and says a short prayer. In this action we see Christ begin his action of leading our prayer. Into his hands we have placed our gifts; from his hands they will be offered to the Father. Before the wine is offered, we see the deacon or priest pouring wine into the chalice and then mixing a little water into the wine as he does so. The words he says inaudible call this action a mystery. He says, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity". Of the two elements, wine and water, wine is the more precious, and so let it represent divinity. The water placed in the wine represents our poor humanity, which will be completely joined to Christ's divinity in the course of what follows. As early as the middle of the third century Saint Cyprian of Carthage was talking this way. He said that we should never offer the wine without water since that would be like offering Christ without his people.

The transformation of both the bread and the wine are anticipated, and we feel the pull of what is about to happen. "It will become for us the bread of life. It will become our spiritual drink." The relation between the gifts that the people bring and their very bodies and lives is manifested with special clarity in the liturgy when incense is used at this point. First the gifts themselves are incensed, which is a ritual gesture marking them out as holy. Then the altar is marked out as holy. The table on which the gifts lie is designated as the holy place that is truly the center of the world: the place for Christ's Paschal Sacrifice. Then the incensing action shifts to honor the bishop as the head of the body, after which the whole body, the assembly, is incensed to indicate that they themselves are what lies on the altar. The whole church is become a sweet-smelling offering rising up to the Father; the whole church becomes a mysterious and holy place precisely because of what is about to happen.

Liturgy Matters

#20

Once the cleansing has been completed, in the incensing of the altar and the people, the priest then stands at the side of the altar and washes his hands, saying a verse from a psalm: "Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sins". As the people see him washing his hands, they too should be reminded that the direction of the mass is about to shift. Our gifts have been brought forward and arranged on the altar. We have moved towards God, and now the priest, acting as Christ will move towards us. Now Christ will make the hands of the priest his own hands, for there is only one priest, and the hands that will take up these gifts, transform them, and offer them to the Father, are the hands of Christ. We have brought our lives in sacrifice to be joined to the sacrifice of Christ, and so the priest urges, "Pray that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father". The people rise to their feet and respond with a short prayer that refers to the priest's hands, naming what is about to happen as "sacrifice at your hands". Our sacrifice is offered only through Christ.

The final prayer is called the Prayer over the Gifts. This prayer varies from Sunday to Sunday, but it always mentions in some form the gifts we have brought and prays for their transformation and ours. When we say Amen to this prayer, we are saying Amen to all that has happened from the collecting of the gifts to this moment. Now we stand poised and ready to participate in the biggest prayer of all.

Liturgy Matters

#21

There are a number of different parts to the Eucharistic prayer, so in our journey through it, we will be able to follow closely the ritual shape so that we can understand better all that is happening. We will go through the parts one by one and see how an enormous momentum builds throughout, climaxing in the whole creation joined to the whole of heaven in a perfect act of praise directed to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharistic prayer begins with the preface dialogue where the priest says, "The Lord be with you," then "Lift up your hearts," then "Let us give thanks...", and then extends through to the great Amen. These three ritual verses are very ancient. We have evidence for their being used at this point in the Eucharistic liturgy in texts as old as the late second century. The first exchange, "The Lord be with you", is a repetition of an exchange from the very beginning of the celebration. The greeting is repeated precisely because we are going to start praying now with much greater intensity and will need divine help. The priest wishes the people this divine assistance and his greeting is a blessing in which he reminds the people that together with him they are about to offer the Church's greatest prayer. We also become aware that by our response, "And with your spirit", that divine help will be needed even more for the priest who will play a central and unique role in this prayer. Even greater intensity of attention is required of him as he performs gestures, handles the gifts, and pronounces words the power of which it is impossible entirely to grasp. As we say, "And with your spirit," the people are addressing the deepest part of his being where he has been ordained precisely to lead the people in this sacred action. The people are saying in effect, "Be the priest for us now", aware that there is only one priest, Christ himself.

The priest's leading role throughout the entire Eucharistic prayer is meant to render concrete for the assembly a fundamental reality of all prayer but especially of this the most intense of prayers. That reality is that the Church addresses itself to the Father only through Christ its head. The priest is a sacrament of Christ signifying this reality. The whole structure of the prayer with the priest speaking and acting and the people following and saying their Amen at the end, is a concrete something, a mystery, in which we experience Christ as head of the body leading his whole body before the Father. Hence, in these first exchanges, the priest and the people have acknowledged and lovingly awakened each other to the roles they must play in what follows.

Liturgy Matters

#22

With the next exchange, the priest is already and entirely within his role as Christ at the head of his body. With a voice of authority, but a voice also filled with excitement and love for what is about to happen, he commands the people, "Lift up your hearts." In the Latin, *sursum corda* "this phrase is like a shout, literally", "Hearts on high!" It is Christ the head telling his body where we are going and we are going there fast. In response to this, the body answers its head and says, "We lift them up to the Lord: that is, we have our hearts where you told us to put them. In effect, this summons on high is a being brought into the all-at-once of Christ's Resurrection, into his hour, where past and future are both made present to us. We are obeying the apostle's injunction when he said, "Since you have been raised up in company with Christ, set your heart on what pertains to higher realms where Christ is seated at God's right hand. Be intent on things above rather than on things of earth" (Colossians 3:1-3). Once we have joined with Christ in the higher realm, he announces the purpose of our being there: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God". The assembly immediately assents to the proposal: "It is right and just". In this response, we are thanking God for all the mighty deeds that God has ever worked for our salvation. Christ himself thanks the Father for his Resurrection, a thanksgiving which includes his joy that we can be made members of his risen body. And for this wondrous gift we, of course, also thank the Father together with him. Thanksgiving is what the Greek word Eucharist means. It is why we can call all that happens at Mass the Eucharist, the thanksgiving.

Liturgy Matters

#23

Continuing with the Eucharistic prayer, we now come to what is called the "preface". The preface is not to be misunderstood as a kind of preamble or introduction, on the contrary, in this context the word preface comes from the Latin word *prae-fari* which means "to do in front of" or "proclaim in the presence of." Therefore, the preface begins what the entire Eucharistic prayer will be: a proclaiming and a performing before God the Father of the Church's prayer.

There are three parts to the Eucharistic prayer. The first part picks up the very words of the last phrase of the preceding dialogue and begins speaking to the Father with the words, "Truly it is right and just to give you thanks, Father..." It is important to notice that the direction of the prayer is toward the Father, as throughout the prayer the Father is named directly, our prayer is from the Church to God the Father.

The second part of the preface always picks up on the phrase "through Christ our Lord" and develops it in a way that is unique to each preface. This is always some succinct expression of what Christ has done for us, phrased to express the particularity of the feast or season. It is also a unique expression of how we as Christians give thanks for what Christ has done for us. Giving thanks to the Father consists of far more than simply our good manners, something along the lines of our knowledge enough to say thanks to anyone who may have done us a service or a kindness. The biblical way of giving thanks consists in a profound recognition of what God has actually done in what we are thanking Him for. The biblical word "confess" is a word that often accompanies the thanksgiving of the Church, and it is a word that swings in two directions at once. Recounting what God has done is called "confessing God", and includes praise of Him, both implicitly and explicitly. The greatness of God in His deeds also brings in its wake an awareness of our own smallness and, worse, our infidelity. Therefore, in the same breath we confess our sins. These are not different movements of prayer but various facets of the one action of giving thanks.

Liturgy Matters

#24

The third part of the preface connects with the preceding by always saying, "Therefore..." With this it presents our desire and our request of God that our voices might blend with the voices of all the angels and saints in singing God's praises. We have stated that the priest leading this prayer images for the assembly the reality of Christ as head of his praying body. The phrase "through Jesus Christ our Lord" in the preface, as well as the second part which expresses his action on our behalf, give occasion to add a refinement to how we understand this. Thus, while it is true that the priest is a sacrament of Christ in his role as head, we are not to imagine somehow that he is Christ. He is an image of Christ but at the same time distinguishable from him.

The preface leads up to the Holy, Holy, Holy, where we all sing the heavenly hymn that has been revealed to us by several key scriptural texts. These texts unveil for us to some extent the invisible realities into which we are now caught up. There is first of all the vision of God that the prophet Isaiah had when he was caught up in prayer and, as he says, "I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple." He goes on to describe what he saw: "Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft." Then he hears them crying aloud to one another: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" In Revelation, John writes a very similar vision when he is "caught up in ecstasy on the Lord's day" and "writes on a scroll" the visions he sees of the heavenly liturgy. At one point in his vision he sees the very throne of God, surrounded by the same winged creatures that Isaiah had seen. He too gives us the words of their ceaseless hymn. He tells us, "Day and night, without pause, they sang: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come!'" These visions of the holy prophet and apostle help us to take the measure of all that is happening at Mass when we sing the same words of the angelic song.

Liturgy Matters

#25

After the assembly sings the Holy, Holy, Holy, all the people kneel, while the priest alone remains standing and, with outstretched arms, again takes up the prayer directly addressed to God the Father. The people kneeling and the priest alone standing and saying the prayer is meant to indicate even more clearly that the whole body directs its prayer to the Father only through the head, Christ. Kneeling here is meant also as a gesture of adoration.

In the Roman rite since the time of the reform of the liturgy mandated by the Second Vatican Council, one of four different Eucharistic prayers is chosen for any given celebration of Mass. All of these prayers begin with the dialogue, a preface, and the singing of the angelic song. Now as the priest continues, he "confesses" God. In acknowledging God, we recall before Him the wonders of creation and the great deeds He worked in history for our salvation. The priest's words recognize this and celebrate it with the words: "We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving." Alternatively, "Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise." Or, "We acknowledge you, Holy Father, for you are great, and you have fashioned all your works in wisdom and love." Poetic language manages to express a lot with a little. The language here is dense and evocative. A single phrase, word, or concept will represent before God whole epochs of what He has done for us. If we acknowledge to the Father what He has done for us, we will come quickly to the Son and the Spirit He has sent to us. "And you so loved the world, Holy Father, that when the fullness of time had come, you sent your only begotten Son to us as Savior." Or, "All life, all holiness comes through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit." Of course, God already knows these things. But He wants to hear from us that we know, and this is exactly what we say to Him. This is the biblical sense of confessing.

Liturgy Matters

#26

The poetic summary used at this point in the third Eucharistic prayer expresses the climax of God's plan for the world as being "so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name." This expression echoes Malachi 1:11, a phrase which the very first generations of Christians saw as a prophecy of the Eucharist. "From the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name is great among the nations; and everywhere they bring sacrifice to my name and a pure offering."

Understanding that the word "sacrifice" is essential for understanding what is happening now, we must take note of its occurrences throughout all four of the Eucharistic prayers. We must recall the words of St. Paul to indicate the particular understanding of sacrifice that we as Christians have: "I urge you, therefore, by the mercies of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1) The sacrifice offered by Christians is the spiritual worship rather than the carnal worship of animals offered in the Temple. Our bodies are a living sacrifice, but we do not offer it up by ourselves, we can only do this through, with, and in Christ's offering. We acknowledge this: "Through him we ask you Father, to accept and bless these gifts we offer you in sacrifice"; that is, the bread and wine we have brought as the sign of our whole lives. We cannot emphasize enough that at this time we are offering our entire selves. This includes our joys and sorrows, sins and weaknesses, pains and sufferings, loves and hates; it is all to be united with Christ's offering.

To be present at this time with our entire being helps each one of us to grasp the immensity of the gift that the Father gave us in the sacrifice of His son. Let us recognize just how fortunate we are to be able to join with Him on the altar.

Liturgy Matters

#27

The priest now turns towards what is called the Epiclesis, which is the technical liturgical term referring in a strict sense to the invocation to the Father that He send the Holy Spirit on the Church's gifts. In Greek it means, "Calling down upon". Perhaps the Latin for this expresses more clearly what is actually happening, it begins, "*Supplices ergo te, Domine, deprecamur*", which means, "Therefore, O Lord, Pleading we beg you..." What we are about to ask for in this movement is based on what God has shown His plan to be; namely, that a perfect offering be made to Him. Therefore, we now ask that the bread and wine on the altar become the body and blood of Christ. This is the petition of the epiclesis. "Let it become for us the body and blood of Christ".

The action of the Holy Spirit here in our liturgy exactly parallels the work of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire life of Jesus. We experience concretely the unveiling of the Trinitarian mystery in our very midst. Concretely because the Spirit sent from the Father now works to transform our gifts into the body and blood of the Son.

It is important for us to pause for a moment on the Spirit's role in the supper the night before Jesus died; for it is especially there that the action of the Holy Spirit in our liturgy exactly parallels the Spirit's role in the life of Jesus. When Jesus took bread and wine into his hands the night before he died, the moment and its possibilities had been long in preparation by the work of the Holy Spirit. "He spoke through the prophets", as we say in the Creed. That is, the whole of Israel's history had been formed in such a way that it could all converge in this moment and its meaning. He takes into his hands what the Spirit had prepared for him; and over it all he pronounces the words that the Spirit with whom he is anointed moves him to utter, "This is my body, this is my blood". Thus, together with the Spirit, does he express his own understanding of his mission, which brings the history of Israel to fulfillment. Thus, together with the Spirit, does he express his own willingness to pour out his life for the sake of the many.

Liturgy Matters

#28

The Institution Narrative is the next part of the Eucharistic prayer and the strand of what the priest is saying comes very much into the fore. A precise and specific event from the life of Jesus is retold; namely, the supper with his disciples the night before he died. The priest recounts this story not merely with words but with gestures as well. The priest retells the moment, acting out before the Father in simple stylized gestures what Jesus did and said at the supper. When he tells that Jesus took bread, he picks up the bread that the people have brought in the procession that day. When he tells how Jesus raised his eyes to heaven, he raises his eyes. He relates that Jesus then blessed the bread, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said....At this point in his telling when the priest comes to what Jesus said, he bows slightly and quotes the very words of Jesus. It is important to notice that when the priest says the words of Jesus at this point, he is using the present tense: "Take this, all of you, and eat it, this is my body which will be given up for you." Something similar happens with the wine when the priest recounts after supper Jesus took the cup. He continues the narrative with the cup of wine and again when he comes to the words of Jesus over the cup, he again bows slightly and speaks the words in present tense: "This is the cup of my blood." The effect is the same. With the saying of these words, the bread and the wine has been transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

What Jesus did at the Last Supper and what he still does now in this moment, for this is an Hour that does not pass away, was to set in motion the mighty events that would be the culmination of his life. He was giving his disciples a sign together with a command to repeat it in his memory. This sign would reveal the meaning of his death, which he knew he would undergo on the morrow. The actual events surrounding his death and the long hours which it was stretched out were too terrible to be understood by anyone, but with this sign performed before and repeated after, Jesus was revealing the meaning of his death and that he was willingly submitting to it.

Liturgy Matters

#29

Two things at least are striking to us in the sign that Jesus made during this supper the night before he died. First, his use of bread and wine and the context of a meal. He is using these basic symbols of human life together, that is, the symbols of love, desire, communion; and he is declaring them to be his voluntary death. What is death for him is meant to be nourishment for us. In the signs of the meal that he selects, he is conscious that he holds all of Israel and all her history in his hands as he takes up bread and wine, and he identifies that whole history with himself and with the death he will undergo the next day, saying over it, "This is my body, this is my blood." The second thing striking is the sign that Jesus made is the language he uses. We call it sacrificial language even if the word sacrifice does not appear. His is "a body handed over." His is "blood poured out" to establish a "new and eternal covenant." The repetition of this sign and Jesus' words around it certainly prepare the way for the Church to understand the Eucharist and the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. As the Church continues to celebrate the Eucharist through her first generations, she eventually comes to understand that Christ's death is in fact the sacrifice against which all others are measured and consequently eclipsed.

Throughout all this action and the accompanying words, it remains important for us to remember with attention that it all happens with the bread and wine that we brought; for this is how our communion in the one sacrifice of Christ is accomplished. It is our lives over which Jesus' once pronounced words continue to be pronounced. And it is under these words, under this blessing, that our lives are transformed, and are allowed to become, and to declare his voluntary death, his sacrifice.

Saint Leo the Great expressed it this way:

"Sharing the body and blood of Christ causes nothing less than our passing over into what we receive, and then in spirit and in flesh we carry him everywhere, the one in whom we were dead, buried and rose again".

Liturgy Matters

#30

After the priest has genuflected in adoration before the blood of Christ present in the consecrated cup, he sings or says solemnly the words, "The Mystery of Faith!" This is not so much a rubrical instruction like, "Stand up now" or "Start singing." It is an exclamation of awe and wonder and is the supreme moment in the liturgy for using this word Mystery. Something is hidden in the bread and wine. Faith perceives it. As if in answer to the priest's exclamation, the voice of the assembly rings out declaring what is perceived: "Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free."

There are other possible responses with which the assembly may answer the priest's exclamation. In all of them we are announcing what is hidden in the bread and wine. We should be aware that each of the possible formulas is a condensed expression of the center of our salvation and mentions the past event of Jesus' death, the present reality of his Resurrection, and his future coming in glory. All of that—past, present, and future---is hidden in what lies on the altar, and faith perceives it and proclaims it.

What the people express in the condensed formula of the Mystery of Faith anticipates what the priest says and does next. The last words of Jesus, which he pronounced over the cup of wine were, "Do this in memory of me." The Greek word in this text is anamnesis, and, similar to the word epiclesis, it has long been used as a technical liturgical term designating a particular part of the Eucharistic prayer. The anamnesis is this part that we are beginning now, and the word literally means "a memorial." Insofar as the whole Eucharistic prayer has a narrative strand that runs through it, it is all memorial or anamnesis. In a stricter sense, the anamnesis is this prayer that follows the proclamation of the Mystery of Faith.

Liturgy Matters

#31

So, we have heard the Lord's command, "Do this in memory of me." The prayer the priest now begins explicitly states before the Father that we are doing exactly that. In all four of the Eucharistic prayers, this part of the prayer begins with a "therefore," and it is as important as the "therefore," that introduced the epiclesis. In the epiclesis we dared to ask for the Spirit to transform our gifts because it was God's own plan that a perfect offering be made to the glory of His name. Now we pray as we do because Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me." The "do this" refers to what we are doing now with bread and wine. The "in memory of me" refers to his death and Resurrection. The prayer the priest prays now presumes that this has been accomplished. And because it has been, while the Church remembers Jesus, she also offers to the Father his body and blood to which she has been joined. These are the two dimensions of the prayer: memorial and offering.

The next part of the Eucharistic prayer anticipates the ritual action of Christ's sacrifice and makes an urgent plea that what it means comes to pass in us. Using now a strong cultic language of sacrifice, we ask the Father to "look with favor on your Church's offering and see the Victim..." We stretch out, as it were, this moment of offering before the Father, knowing that the offering—Christ's body and blood—will be the basis on which the petition that follows is made: "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one Spirit in Christ." This is the second epiclesis, a second request for the Holy Spirit, this time not that the gifts be transformed into the body and blood of Christ but that we who receive them be transformed into these. This is our communion with Christ's sacrifice. It will be accomplished in our reception of his body and blood.

Liturgy Matters

#32

Communion with one another is an essential part of God's plan; and having designed salvation with this shape, God surely is teaching us and causing us to participate in the tremendous regard He has for us, His tremendous love toward us. We are made of double communion. Saint Augustine expresses it with utter precision, when he says, "The true peace of rational creatures, which is the only peace of the heavenly city, consists in a perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and one another in God." Enjoyment of God and of one another in God—this enjoyment is already tasted in the Eucharistic feast. Another name for this is praise. There is also a technical term, based on Greek, which is doxology. A sense of doxology or praising and glorifying God has run through the Eucharistic prayer from the very start. In fact, in the preface and the angelic hymn the notion of doxology was very much to the fore, even if the term was not used yet. But there is a specific part of the Eucharistic prayer that is called the doxology, and it is this that closes the whole prayer. Doxology is this prayer's final thrust, come full circle from the doxology of the preface.

The bishop, or priest, lifts up the bread and wine—bread and wine which we have brought, bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ in the form of his sacrifice which never passes away, bread and wine which we are shortly to consume—and lifting them up he presents them to God the Father as the "perfect offering made to the glory of His name." "Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever." In that moment, the Church is doing what Christ did and forever does: she offers his one body, to which she has been joined, to the Father for the glory of His name and for the salvation of the world. This is our communion in the sacrifice of Christ. This is perfect praise.

Liturgy Matters

#33

The priest has led this whole prayer, speaking in the name of the Church, acting in the person of Christ. To all that Christ has done, to all that is happening, the assembly cries out a resounding Amen. This is the biggest Amen of the Mass and so is the biggest Amen in the world. This Amen never ends; it is eternal as it echoes around the globe, echoes throughout the centuries, and echoes in the halls of heaven.

After the Great Amen that closes the Eucharistic prayer, the whole assembly is on its feet because it has been carried by this prayer into the very presence of God and into its future in Christ. Hidden in the image is the assembly standing with Christ in heaven before the throne of God. Now begins another unit of the Mass referred to as the communion rite. It begins with the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is an invocation of God by a name that is possible for us to call Him only through our communion in the sacrifice of Christ: the name "Father." It is important for us to remember that Jesus gave us this prayer as a way of healing with the Father. In a very real sense, the Lord's Prayer is a formula for healing. Praise + Forgiveness = Healing.

Following the Lord's Prayer is the Sign of Peace. This is a ritual exchange, not a practical greeting. By means of the set phrase, "Peace be with you," and a gesture which signifies our love for one another in Christ, we are playing out yet another dimension of communion; namely, our being joined together as one body in Christ. We who have just said together to God, "Our Father," in consequence now turn to one another and say, "Brother" and "Sister." We who have just prayed, "Forgive us as we forgive," turn to one another with this sign of reconciliation among ourselves.

The third part of the communion rite consists of the "Breaking of the Bread." This is the most ancient term by which Christians called the Mass. Here we sing, "Lamb of God," and are addressing Jesus himself by this title. He is our Passover Lamb whose body has been sacrificed, whose blood has been poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. This hymn is the same song sung eternally in the feast of heaven which the apostle reported in the book of Revelation: "As my vision continued, I heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, thousands, and tens of thousands, and they cried out, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!'" (Revelation 5:11-12). Or again, "This is the wedding day of the Lamb...Happy are they who have been invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb!" (Revelation 19:7, 9).

Liturgy Matters

#34

And now begins the awesome moment of the Mass, the distribution of the sacred gifts. At this moment, the priest holds up before the people the broken bread and, as one declaring a huge mystery, tells the people to fix their gaze on it. He says, "Behold the Lamb of God!" using the same phrase that the people have been singing. He continues with their same phrase, "Behold him who takes away the sins of the world!" "Happy are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb!" When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, it is a sacred moment, a moment to be cherished and revered. St. Cyril of Jerusalem reveals to us a poetic reflection on how our attitude should be expressed as we receive our Lord when he writes:

"Trust not the judgment to your bodily palate, no, but to unfaltering faith. For those who taste are bidden to taste, not bread and wine, but the anti-typical Body and Blood of Christ. Do not approach, then, with your wrists extended or your fingers spread; but make your left hand a throne for the right, as for that which is to receive a king. And having hallowed your palm, receive the Body of Christ, saying over it, "Amen." Then after having carefully blessed your eyes by the touch of the holy Body, consume it—carefully, lest you lose any portion. For whatever you lose is evidently a loss to you as it were from one of your own limbs. Tell me, if anyone gave you grains of gold, would you not hold them with care, on your guard against losing any? Will you not keep watch more carefully, then, that not a crumb fall from you of what is more precious than gold and precious stones?

Then after you have consumed the Body of Christ, draw near also to the cup of His Blood; not stretching forth your hands, but bending, and saying with an air of worship and reverence, "Amen." Bless yourself by partaking also of the Blood of Christ. And while the moisture is still upon your lips, touch it with your hands, and bless your eyes and brow and the other organs of sense. Then wait for the prayer, and give thanks to God, who has counted you worthy of such great mysteries.

This beautiful example is the reverence we should be demonstrating during this most sacred time. This is the example we should set for one another, that there may be no confusion as to what we are receiving in communion. IT IS OUR LORD!

Liturgy Matters

#35

Now we have received, we have been given the manna from heaven, the food of angels; what a gift, what a grace. As we sit in silence, in contemplation of the wondrous gift we have received, we are struck with awe at the fact that God should speak to us, our response can only be silence. But now our silence is even deeper, for we are struck with awe at the entire mystery of our faith concentrated into what has just happened; namely, that the eternal Son should become incarnate and share himself with us in this most intimate of ways.

There are two prayers in the large book from which the priest prays, which are printed there just to aid his own devotion at the moment of receiving communion. And so they are not generally known among the faithful. But those prayers can be a wonderful indicator of how we might speak to Jesus in this moment of silence.

"With faith in your love and mercy, I eat your body and drink your blood..." Or, "By your holy body and blood free me from all my sins, from every evil. Keep me faithful to your teaching, and never let me be parted from you."

The closing prayer, or prayer after communion, brings together all of the liturgical units of the whole mass. The priest says, "Let us pray," and the assembly as one stands again. Using some phrase or image from the feast or the day in question, the priest prays that the sacrament bear fruit in us and that we remain faithful to all that we have received. The "Amen" of the people is said immediately in response to this prayer, but it is an Amen that closes the entire unit that began with the Lord's Prayer.

Liturgy Matters

#36

The final unit of the Mass is called the dismissal rite. It is a very short unit, but an extremely important one. If “Amen” is a signal that a liturgical unit is ending, the repetition of the greeting “The Lord be with you” is a sign that a new one is opening. The Mass ends as it began; namely, under the sign of the cross and “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The priest traces in blessing over the assembly a large sign of the cross, saying, “May almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” As he does so, the people mark again the sign on their bodies and say, “Amen” to the blessing.

After the blessing, the priest or deacon, in some short phrase, dismisses the people, sending them out. But this dismissal ought not to be understood simply as the banal announcement that “it’s over; you can go home now.” It needs to be grasped within the dynamic of Jesus’ words, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This “as” and “so” express a huge mystery; indeed, nothing less than an echo of the Trinitarian mystery in which the Son comes forth from the Father. In that same way, from those same mysterious depths, this assembly comes forth now from the risen Lord and is sent into the world. Thus, the pattern according to which the Lord entered the world must become the pattern for how every Christian comes into the world after celebrating Eucharist. Now the assembly has been made Church, and this is the Church in the world.

In the end it is Christ himself, the eternal Son of the Father, carried now in the flesh and in the lives of his members, poured out in self-emptying love. This is what it means to be a kingdom of priests. Through communion in the body and blood of Christ, the whole Church and each member become for the world what Christ is for the world: “life-giving Spirit.” And the Church becomes this in the same pattern whereby Christ and the Spirit are this; namely, a complete self emptying. “There is no greater love than this,” and only love is credible to the world that does not yet believe.

And so ends the liturgy, but the Mass continues, as we go out to fulfill our call to be good Christians. May we all remember the gift we are given each Sunday, and share this love with all we encounter daily.