

The Eucharistic Prayers

by Arthur David Canales

For many years, I have asked, in various catechetical settings, hundreds of typical Sunday-Mass-going Catholics: “What is your understanding of the Eucharistic Prayer?” The answers vary, from the theologically simplistic, “It consecrates the bread and wine,” to the pastorally pious, “It is the sacrifice of the Mass.” Both are correct, but neither fully express the Catholic interpretation of the Church’s great prayer of “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, of reconciliation and expiation.”ⁱ The pastoral concern I have is that Catholics don’t seem to understand the treasure and richness of the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) declares that the Sunday celebration of Eucharist is the *source* and *summit* of Catholic identity and liturgical spirituality (articles 10–12)ⁱⁱ

The zenith of the Catholic Sunday worship experience is the Eucharistic Prayer, or *anaphora* in Greek.ⁱⁱⁱ

The main theological and liturgical action that the celebration of Sunday Eucharist maintains is the eightfold movement of the Eucharistic Prayer, particularly Jesus’ memorial command: “*Do this in remembrance of me.*”^{iv} Jesus’ command is found in the New Testament texts of 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, which scripture scholars maintain is the earliest Eucharist account of the Last Supper, and in subsequent parallel texts of Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20; and Matthew 26:26–29.^v

Historically

At the Last Supper Jesus gave thanks—*eucharistia* in Greek—to God over bread and wine, probably using the typical Jewish meal prayers, known as the *berakoth*, that he knew since childhood and was comfortable praying. Jesus was also familiar with “grace after meals” known as the *birkat ha-mazon*.^{vi} So the antecedents of the Eucharistic Prayer are Jewish in nature, stemming from Jewish meal prayers. These, and other Jewish prayers that Jesus would have used, such as the benediction prayer (*Yotser*) preceding the daily recitation of the *Shema* (Hear O Israel . . .).^{vii} praise God, calling God blessed.

The Syrian document known as the *Didache*, or the *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, contains the most ancient prayer used during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, dating to between AD 100 and AD125. Chapters 9, 10, and 14 of the *Didache* are of particular interest to students and scholars of the Eucharist. “The *Didache* is one of the most impressive texts of Christian antiquity,’ because this little manual was, at one and the same time, a work of catechesis, liturgy, and discipline for the primitive Jewish-Christian Church.”^{viii} Although early writers quoted from the *Didache*, the document itself was not discovered until 1873 in modern-day Istanbul.

Another ancient Eucharistic Prayer comes from Bishop Hippolytus of Rome in a manuscript titled *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. AD 215). “This text not only has a theological and aesthetic or literary charm; it is also fascinating for the fortunes—or misfortunes—it has gone through in its history.”^{ix} Anyone who is serious about studying the worship, Eucharist, or liturgy of the Catholic Church must investigate the *Apostolic Tradition*. Here is a remnant of Hippolytus’ Eucharistic Prayer. “Giving thanks, *the presbyter* says: The Lord be with you. *And all reply*: And with your spirit. *The bishop* says: Lift up your hearts. *The people respond*: We have them with the Lord.”^x Does this prayer seem familiar? It is the foundation of our current “Eucharistic Prayer II” of the Roman Rite, the shortest of all Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman ritual.

Many Eucharistic Prayers over the centuries have shaped our contemporary Eucharistic Prayers—too many to address in this essay. However, for those interested in furthering their knowledge of liturgical



prayer in the Catholic tradition I would highly recommend Bradshaw's concise book entitled *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*.^{xi}

Different Eucharistic Prayers are used for different holy days and various circumstances. Though there are many Eucharistic Prayers, each is a celebration of the community, designed exclusively for worship in communal gatherings that celebrate Catholic faith in Jesus the Christ. There are a total of ten authorized Eucharistic Prayers: one from the old Roman Canon, which borrows elements from the Tridentine Mass ("Eucharistic Prayer I"); three additional prayers which were published in the older 1970 edition of the Roman Missal ("Eucharistic Prayer II," "Eucharistic Prayer III," and "Eucharistic Prayer IV"); two prayers for reconciliation Masses; three prayers for Masses with children; and one prayer for special circumstances.

Theologically

As the official prayer of the Church, liturgical prayer carries a distinct ecclesial character. For example, in "Eucharistic Prayer III," the presider affirms, "All life, all holiness comes from you, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit." In the public setting of liturgical prayer, this Christian reality is expressed as a statement of faith. The prayer of the People of God expresses the faith of the People of God. Hence the ancient axiom "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*," "the law of prayer (worship) is the law of belief," meaning that the liturgy of the Church provides the basis for the Church's theology. By the same token, authentic worship always points to true doctrine. Liturgical prayer in general and Eucharistic Prayers specifically offer a roadmap to the way of Christian discipleship and therefore should lead to *lex vivendi*, or the law of living. This way of life ultimately links prayer, discipleship, stewardship, and the Sunday Eucharist together.^{xii}

Pope John Paul II, in his last papal encyclical, "*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*," addressed the need for Catholics to "rekindle" their understanding of the celebration of Sunday Eucharist as well as their "amazement" at the redemption offered by means of the sacred banquet.^{xiii} Although the Pope does not address the Eucharistic Prayers specifically, he does highlight the theological and spiritual significance of certain aspects of the prayer, such as memorial and sacrifice. He also affirms the "benefits" for celebrating the Sunday Eucharist, such as bread for life, central to the Catholic mystery of faith, and Christ's real presence. For John Paul II, the spiritual reality gained through fruitful participation in the Sunday Eucharist is a foretaste of the fullness of joy and hope promised by Jesus Christ.^{xiv}

Spiritually

The Eucharistic Prayers are designed to ask the Spirit to assist the gathered community in its efforts to realize and remember God's great deeds in and through Jesus Christ. They are petitions for divine response through the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Prayers also help Catholics to awaken and become attuned to the inner meaning of the Christian experience as a people hungry for God and as a people who pursue *transformation* under the impact of the celebration of Sunday Eucharist.

Each Eucharistic Prayer consists of three sections: (1) a petition for the working of the Holy Spirit, (2) a description of the effects of the Holy Spirit's action of transforming the Eucharistic elements, and (3) the "fruits" of the Holy Spirit, which are the *res tantum* or ultimate reality of the sacrament for the community: of the faithful, and the community as a whole, as they become more fully incorporated into the Body of Christ and become more like Christ.^{xv}



In the Eucharistic Prayers, the Holy Spirit, liturgy, and human life are integrated. The believer enters into the sacredness of God and experiences the otherness of God in the present. Ideally this experience allows God to take hold of all events, choices, and life settings that keep us distant from God. The believer places one's self before God at the altar, to be transformed by the sacred liturgical action and to dare one's self to be renewed by the interaction and dialogue with God.^{xvi} The Eucharistic Prayers are designed to draw us closer and deeper into the Mystery of God's love and compassion, thereby transforming us into sons and daughters of the light.

Pastorally

Pastorally, the Eucharistic Prayers are three-way conversations involving God, the gathered assembly, and the ordained presider (priest or bishop). First, they are dialogues between God and the gathered assembly. The prayers are fashioned to capture the imagination and passion of the human heart's longing for God. Second, they are dialogues between God and the presider. The presider is at both the service of Christ and the Church while offering these prayers. Third, they are dialogues between the gathered assembly and presider. The presider proclaims the Eucharistic Prayers, offering them in the name of the gathered community. Thus these three dialogues are expressions of love, forgiveness, and celebration for God, people, and priest.

The Eucharistic Prayers are the *prayers of the people* and not exclusively the prayer of the priest. The presider leads the congregation in liturgical prayer, but he offers prayer in the name of the community. If Catholics mistakenly believe that the Eucharistic Prayer is the priest's prayer only, then there is the danger of oversimplifying and misinterpreting their own role as assembly: they may see themselves as "passive spectators" rather than "full, active, participants" within the sacred action.^{xvii}

Devotionally

God is worthy of praise and the Eucharistic Prayers of the Catholic Church highlight this reality. They are prayers offered on behalf of the Body of Christ gathered for worship, addressed to God, and prompted by the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Prayers are a form of adoration and are always directed to the First Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father of Jesus and Creator of the Cosmos. The Eucharistic Prayers are theocentric in orientation,^{xviii} praising and worshipping God. The prayers exalt God for the many blessings, gifts, and pleasures God bestows upon us as a Catholic Community.^{xix} Fundamentally, the Catholic Church's Eucharistic Prayers are exhaustive prayers of thanksgiving *par excellence* for all of God's saving deeds; the greatest of these deeds is the wonderful reality of the Paschal Mystery (spanning Jesus' life from the Annunciation to the Ascension).^{xx}

There are many reasons for individuals to praise God. Collectively the major events of salvation history are indeed worthy for offering thanks and praise to God: the creation of the universe, the Exodus event, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the future Christ's second coming (parousia). The ancient Syrian Chaldean Anaphora of Addai and Mari summarizes the laudatory nature of the Eucharistic Prayers, "Worthy of praise . . . is the adorable and praise-worthy Name of the glorious Trinity, Father and Son, and Holy Spirit, who created the world."^{xxi}



Liturgically

The recently revised *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, promulgated in 2000 and approved in the United States in 2003, functions as the liturgical “bible” of the structure, theology, and rubrics for Mass in the Roman Rite. It clearly states that the Eucharistic prayer is the “center and summit of the entire celebration . . . and is a prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification” for the Sunday Eucharistic celebration.^{xxii}

The Eucharistic Prayers themselves are eight seamless movements that take place during the Liturgy of the Eucharist.^{xxiii} This eightfold movement is the fundamental theological and liturgical action of the Sunday Eucharistic celebration. It is the gathered community’s sacred interaction with God. The great American spiritual master Thomas Merton (1915–1968) described the Eucharistic Prayer within Sunday liturgy in this way: “It is a kind of ballet, with similar prescribed movements and gestures.”^{xxiv} It is worthwhile to examine all eight movements of the Eucharistic Prayers.

1. Thanksgiving is the preface or the introduction to the prayer.^{xxv} Like the rest of the Eucharistic Prayers, it is a three-part dialogue between the presider and the gathered assembly. It commemorates all of God’s wonderful acts of creation and of salvation history, which leads the Church to remembering and giving thanks.^{xxvi}

2. Acclamation or the *Sanctus* is the Church’s great song of God’s glory and it is typically sung.^{xxvii} The *Sanctus* gathers the Eucharistic congregation and unites it in song and fellowship with the communion of saints and the heavenly choirs of angels. The *Sanctus* is a biblically-based prayer taken from the passages found in Isaiah 6:3, Matthew 21:9, and Revelation 4:8 (“Holy, holy, holy . . . Hosanna in the highest!”).^{xxviii}

3. Epiclesis is a Greek term that refers to the invocation of the Holy Spirit, to change the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus the Christ.^{xxix} The *epiclesis* is also the request and invitation to the Holy Spirit to transform the gathered Eucharistic assembly into a more spiritually complete people: pure, holy, compassionate, empathetic, and other-oriented—ultimately more Christlike. Consequently the purpose of the Sunday Eucharist is not to change bread and wine only, but to change the hearts, minds, and attitudes of the people gathered as an assembly of God. The liturgical scholar Robert Taft, SJ, states, “Eucharist is about changing you and me!”^{xxx} The Sunday Eucharist reshapes, remolds, and reforms our lives so that we become more Christlike.^{xxxi}

4. The institution narrative and consecration comprise the pinnacle of the Eucharistic Prayer.^{xxxii} The institution narrative and consecration call to mind Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper: “Take this, all of you, and eat: this is my Body which will be given up for you,” and “Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting Covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.” The *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* maintains that the words of institution are *real* consecratory words and actions, which Jesus inaugurated at the Last Supper whereby he commanded these truths to be related so as to carry on the ministry, mission, and mystery of God.^{xxxiii} The Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are transformed or changed into Christ’s Body and Blood.^{xxxiv}

Theologically, there is not an exact moment of transformation of the Eucharistic elements, but a metaphysical process of transformation, which begins when the Eucharistic congregation gathers as the People of God in confident faith to celebrate and commemorate the life, death, and Resurrection of



Jesus.^{xxxv} Today liturgical scholars avoid the “exact moment” theologizing, because such focus has a tendency to dissect the reality of the Eucharist Prayer which, in its purest form, must be considered as a whole.^{xxxvi}

The *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* does not refer to a “moment of consecration” at which the bread and wine can rightly be considered “changed,” but to the reality that the Eucharistic species are changed through the metaphysical process transubstantiation.^{xxxvii} Solid post-Vatican II Eucharistic theology advocates that the entire Eucharistic Prayer is consecratory because ultimately the One who consecrates is God through the power of the Holy Spirit.^{xxxviii} Therefore, the Holy Spirit, by means of the words and actions of Christ, consecrates the Eucharistic Elements of bread and wine and changes them into Christ’s Body and Blood.^{xxxix}

5. The *anamnesis* is a Greek term that means the act of making memorial, remembering, and bringing to collective recall (*zakkron* in Hebrew). The *anamnesis* is the gathered assembly’s acclamation of praise and thanksgiving for Christ’s saving gift and for Christ’s second coming (*parousia* in Greek).^{xl} In a real way, the Church keeps Jesus’ memorial by recalling the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. Jesus’ injunction “Do this in memorial of me” is *anamnesis*. It is a direct decree, order, and mandate from Jesus to celebrate the Eucharist actively, not passively.

Important to this discussion is the memorial command that instructs Catholic Christians to *do* Eucharist. Jesus’ ordinance “to do” Eucharist is a direct demand to take the term *Eucharist* not as a noun or object, but as a verb or action. Christians are to do Eucharist! Therefore, the phrase “to do Eucharist” appears to be a more accurate reading of the root meaning of the word *Eucharist*, calling us to Christian compassion, service, social justice, and stewardship. The origin of the term *Eucharist* is from the Greek verb *eucharistia*, “to give thanks.” Sunday Eucharist is an action—one that Christians engage in and participate in through remembering and making present the Paschal Mystery of Jesus the Christ through their actions. The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is a community event that gathers and involves all participants in the congregation under the liturgical leadership of the presider to celebrate the Paschal Mystery as a faithful and Spirit-filled community.

What of a Catholic who celebrates Sunday Eucharist every week, month after month, and year after year but is *not* involved in some type of parish, or community ministry or service? One can argue that such a person is a living contradiction.^{xli} Why? Because celebrating the Sunday Eucharist calls us to action, motivation, and service in the world. The Sunday Eucharist nourishes us, sustains us, and gets us out of the pews, to serve God and neighbor.^{xlii}

6. The offering is the assembly’s petition to God to make the offering holy and acceptable.^{xliii} It is the Church’s self-offering and the self-offering of each person who is engaged in the liturgy through full, active, conscious, and fruitful participation.^{xliv} The Church’s “intention is that the faithful not only offer this victim but also learn to offer themselves and so day-by-day to surrender themselves, through Christ the Mediator.”^{xlv} (The offering during the Eucharistic Prayers is not to be confused with Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts preceding the Eucharistic Prayers, which used to be called offertory, before the Second Vatican Council.) What exactly is being offered in the Eucharistic Prayers? Christ, the one who is present in the midst of the assembly and who is present in many different forms: gathered assembly, proclamation of the Word of God, Bread and Cup, and Body and Blood.^{xlvi} This offering is the essential offering in the liturgy.

7. The intercessions contained within the Eucharist Prayers may seem similar to the General Intercessions (Prayers of the Faithful) that conclude the Liturgy of the Word. But these intercessions are



unique. They connect the local community's Eucharistic celebration with the local diocese and with the universal Catholic Church as it gathers on the Lord's day, around the Lord's table, to share in the Lord's supper. These intercessions express the concern of the entire Church of Heaven and earth, part of the Church's continuous intercessions to God. They also connect the local community to Christ's continuous intercession to God because of his once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross at Calvary for the salvation of the universe.^{xlviii} The intercessions within the Eucharistic Prayer express our communion with God.^{xlviii}

8. The doxology is the final concluding prayer of the *anaphora*, which is a prayer of praise addressed to the glorification of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit.^{xlix} The presider lifts up bread and wine and concludes by saying: "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever." This is the classical Christian prayer whereby the people praise the Trinity. Responding to the presider, the assembly assents to the final Doxology by responding "Yes!" by singing joyfully the "Great Amen." The assembly's affirmation of assent by singing "Amen!" does not refer to only the final Doxology of the *anaphora* but to the entire Eucharistic Prayer. The "Great Amen" functions as both the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer and the introduction of the Communion Rite.¹

Cosmically and Celestially

There is a cosmic and celestial dimension to the Sunday Eucharist and the Eucharistic Prayers.^{li} Our worship life here on earth also has an eternal component in Heaven.

The "heavenly or celestial liturgy," as the early Church fathers and mothers referred to it, is indeed a ballet of praise that takes place in God's eternal household; it is a celestial dance with cosmic implications.^{lii} When Merton described the Eucharistic Prayer as a ballet, he was referring to the artistic dimension of the Eucharistic Prayer. He envisioned it as a liturgical drama that unfolds during each Sunday Eucharist, with eschatological dimensions. The Eucharistic Prayers are "part of a cosmic sweep and whole."^{liiii} Our actions, especially during the Eucharistic Prayer, as we place our own lives on the altar, point to the celestial dance with God. It is during the Sunday Eucharist that human ingenuity and creative work are brought to the altar and transformed by the sacred action of proclaiming a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Our human gifts become the holy gifts of Christ and call us toward that unique cosmic liturgy.^{liv}

The Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of praise, a prayer of movement, and a prayer of the people. The eightfold movement of the Eucharistic Prayer demonstrates firmly that this great prayer is the source and summit of Roman Catholic identity, liturgical spirituality, and Eucharistic theology.^{lv} The greatness of the Eucharistic Prayer is its simplicity and its beauty. It empowers and enables the entire liturgical assembly to be attentive to God and attuned to the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Prayer engages the assembly, through the words of the presider, in celebrating the manifestation of Jesus in the Eucharist.^{lvi}

Endnotes

ⁱ *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, 2000. English translation of the *General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, (International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), article 2.

ⁱⁱ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963). *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC)*, in Austin Flannery, OP, editor, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, volume 1, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1992), articles 10–12.



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- iii Adam, Adolf, *The Eucharistic Celebration: The Source and Summit of Faith* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), pages 71–94.
- iv Canales, Arthur David, “Our Sacred Dance with God: An Interpretive Pastoral and Spiritual Understanding of the Eucharistic Prayer,” *Emmanuel: Eucharistic Spirituality* (March–April), volume 116, number 2, 2010, page 148.
- v Canales, page 148.
- vi Smolarski, Dennis C., SJ, *Eucharistia: A Study of the Eucharistic Prayer*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1982), page 13.
- vii Deiss, Lucien, *The Mass*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), pages 61–89.
- viii Mazza, Enrico, *The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer* (New York, NY: Pueblo Publishing, 1995), page 12.
- ix Mazza, page 98.
- x For a fuller treatment of Saint Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition*, chapter 4, see Daniel J. Sheerin, *The Eucharist* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986), pages 354–356.
- xi Bradshaw, Paul F. *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992). This short read is a concise look at the overall evolution of liturgical prayer in the Christian tradition, which provides valuable insight into ancient church orders.
- xii Irwin, Kevin W., *Models of the Eucharist* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2005), pages 300–301.
- xiii Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (*Church of the Eucharist*, April 17, 2003). Taken from *Origins*, volume 32, number 46, May 1, 2003, number 6.
- xiv *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, number 18.
- xv Smolarski, page 80.
- xvi Canales, page 150.
- xvii *SC*, number 22.
- xviii Mazza, Enrico, *The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite* (New York, NY: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), page 5.
- xix Canales, page 151.
- xx Canales, page 151.
- xxi The ancient Syrian text of the Eucharistic Prayer of the Apostles of Addai and Mari is found in the classic exposition on the Eucharistic Prayers by French theologian Louis Jean Bouyer, CO, *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayers* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), page 147.
- xxii *GIRM*, number 78.
- xxiii Canales, Arthur David, *Toward a Theological, Liturgical, and Pastoral Understanding of Sunday Parish Worship with Deacon and / or Lay Presiders*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, Doctoral Dissertation, 1996), page 204, footnote 493.
- xxiv Rice, Edward, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (New York: Image Books, 1972), page 97.
- xxv *GIRM*, number 79a.
- xxvi Canales, page 152.
- xxvii *GIRM*, number 79b.
- xxviii Canales, page 152.
- xxix *GIRM*, number 79c.
- xxx Taft, Robert, SJ, *Beyond East & West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1984), page 144.
- xxxi Canales, page 153.
- xxxii *GIRM*, number 79d.
- xxxiii *GIRM*, number 79d.
- xxxiv *GIRM*, number 3. Regarding the metaphysical, theological, and spiritual process of substantial alteration within the Eucharistic elements the document states, “. . . is proclaimed in the celebration of Mass not only by means of the very words of consecration, by which Christ becomes present through transubstantiation, but also by that interior disposition and outward expression of supreme reverence and adoration in which the Eucharistic Liturgy is carried out.”
- xxxv Canales, page 153.
- xxxvi Canales, page 53.
- xxxvii *GIRM*, number 3.
- xxxviii Canales, page 154.
- xxxix *GIRM*, number 79d.
- xl *GIRM*, number 79e.
- xli Canales, page 155.



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- xlii Canales, page 155.
xliii *GIRM*, number 79f.
xliv *SC*, number 14.
xlv *GIRM*, number 79f.
xlvi Smolarski, page 72.
xlvii Canales, p. 155.
xlviii *GIRM*, no. 79g.
xlix *GIRM*, no. 79h.
l Canales, page 156.
li Canales, page 156.
lii Barron, Robert, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), page 159.
liii Irwin, Kevin W., "Models of the Eucharist," *Origins*, 31:3 (May 31, 2001), page 42. Also see Irwin's book *Models of the Eucharist* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2005), pages 39–66.
liv Irwin, 2005, pages 62–64.
lv Canales, page 157.
lvi Canales, page 157.

