

Formation for Eucharist: Eucharistic Prayer II.

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Eucharistic Prayer II is nearly everyone's favorite because it is so short. In fact, the first draft of the prayer went by the title "Shorter Eucharistic Prayer" – in comparison with Eucharistic Prayer I, which is about three times longer.

Eucharistic Prayer II carries other recommendations. Its direct style makes it approachable. Its flow seems natural. Once people grasp how it works, they hold a key that unlocks the structure of almost every other Eucharistic Prayer in the Roman Missal.

The earliest known version of this prayer is in a work called *The Apostolic Tradition* from the 3rd or 4th century. People have long assumed that the author was Hippolytus, an antipope, martyr and saint, remembered in the liturgical calendar every year on August 13. However, recent scholarship has raised doubts that Hippolytus wrote this work. He did write something called *The Apostolic Tradition*, but it is not clear if he wrote this one, or if this one can even be called *The Apostolic Tradition* at all. But one has to call it something, so the title has stuck.

This same work richly describes early catechumenate and initiatory practices. These influenced the restoration of the catechumenate after the Second Vatican Council. *The Apostolic Tradition* also provided prayers for the ordinations of deacons, priests and bishops. That is where one finds the text of what became Eucharistic Prayer II. *The Apostolic Tradition* says that a newly consecrated bishop should know how to improvise a eucharistic prayer. But if he does not, it supplies this model that he can follow.

The eucharistic prayer from *The Apostolic Tradition* was already being used by some other Churches, so when its addition to the Roman Missal was proposed, it won quick acceptance. It was old. It came with a preface that could be exchanged for others already in the Roman tradition. It preserved a simple structure. It was free of complex gestures. Therefore it would counterbalance the Roman Canon, which heretofore presented the sole option in the Roman Rite, and which – it was feared – would be difficult to understand even when translated into vernacular languages.

Still, the study group preparing the revised Order of Mass faced some difficulties with this prayer: It had no Sanctus. Its epiclesis followed the institution narrative. There weren't any intercessions, no mention of saints, and no prayer for the dead.

So they “fixed” it. They supplied the missing elements to make it follow the outline of a eucharistic prayer found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal #79: thanksgiving, Sanctus, epiclesis, institution narrative and consecration, anamnesis, offering, intercessions, and doxology. The prayer we now call Eucharistic Prayer II has *The Apostolic Tradition* as its ancestor, not as its twin.

It opens with the preface dialogue. This is more important than you think. The first evidence we have for this complete three-part dialogue is the start of this prayer in *The Apostolic Tradition*. Every time you begin Eucharistic Prayer II with those oft-repeated phrases, you are using them in their most ancient place, standing on the shoulders of nearly two thousand years of Christians who started the eucharistic prayer this way.

The preface is largely the one found in *The Apostolic Tradition*, but with this difference. The source document says to God that Jesus was “conceived in the womb, was incarnate and manifested as your Son.” Today it could be misconstrued that Jesus became the Son of God sometime after he was born. That line was also fixed for its first appearance in the Roman Missal.

The conclusion of the preface needed a transition to the Sanctus. Well, it needed a Sanctus, too. The study group wanted all the eucharistic prayers to share some common traits, and this acclamation by the people was high on the list.

The addition of the Sanctus also created a need for a transitional line between it and the epiclesis. The study group turned to the Mozarabic liturgy, still popular in parts of Spain, and lifted the expression “fount of all holiness.” By calling God not just holy but the source of holiness, the prayer moves fluidly toward its main request, asking this holy God to bestow holiness upon the gifts of bread and wine.

The members of the group then added an epiclesis before the institution narrative. Largely due to the criticism of Eastern Churches, the new eucharistic prayers all added an explicit calling upon the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

In this case, the text was inspired by the *Missale Gothicum* of the 7th to 8th century. There, in a eucharistic prayer composed for use at the Paschal Vigil, the priest compared the Holy Spirit to God’s gift of dew upon the earth. The Old Testament includes several metaphors concerning dew (for example, Hosea 14:6; Psalm 133:3; and Isaiah 45:8 – a text that inspired the Advent hymn *Rorate Coeli*, or “Drop Down Dew.”) God mysteriously wraps the world with the refreshment of water and light, clothing the earth in beauty and nourishing it with moisture.

That image was difficult to express in English, so the first translation omitted the word that was clearly there in Latin. The revised translation restores the word “dewfall” – not

because of *The Apostolic Tradition*, but because of the *Missale Gothicum*, an early witness to the word in the history of liturgical prayer.

To introduce the institution narrative, the second Eucharistic Prayer notes that Jesus entered his Passion willingly. It reminds the community that God remains in control of events that may otherwise seem hopeless.

The narrative then follows the formula established by the study group. This consistency stabilizes the core of the eucharistic prayers, even as their content and vocabulary adduce variety.

All the eucharistic prayers place the offering within the anamnesis. Following the memorial acclamation, the priest repeats its themes while framing a key verb: As we remember, “we offer.” *The Apostolic Tradition* used the words “bread” and “chalice” here, but for clarity the revised text expands these to “bread of life” and “chalice of salvation.”

In the intercessions, Eucharistic Prayer II limits the references to the saints. To be ecumenically sensitive, the two lists of saints from Eucharistic Prayer I were left aside. Only Mary is mentioned by name.

This same section begins with the phrase, “Humbly we pray.” The study group inserted these words to imitate a parallel section in Eucharistic Prayer I that begins, “In humble prayer, we ask you.” The petition here, “that we may be gathered into one,” was inspired by a prayer in the *Didache*, from the turn of the 2nd century.

Note that the community prays for non-Christians, who were not included in the intercessions of Eucharistic Prayer I. Among the dead are “all who have died in your mercy,” contrasted with “our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection.” These intercessions may be expanded to remember a specific person at funerals or masses for the dead.

Eucharistic Prayer II is especially appropriate for weekday masses, and it has become a popular addition to the way Catholics pray.