

Formation for Eucharist: Eucharistic Prayer IV

When the revised Order of Mass was being prepared in the 1960s, the study group considered adding to the eucharistic prayers the Anaphora of Saint Basil, which was already being used by a wide variety of Eastern Churches. If the West adopted it, it would rank as a momentous ecumenical achievement. The study group imagined Christians all around the world having in their liturgical repertoire one eucharistic prayer shared in common.

The proposal lost by a single vote. The main problem is that the Anaphora of Saint Basil follows an early tradition that placed the epiclesis after the institution narrative, not before. Eastern eucharistic theology holds that the epiclesis consecrates; whereas Western eucharistic theology unites the consecration with the institution narrative of the Last Supper. In the Anaphora of Saint Basil, the story of the Last Supper is part of the history of salvation. Then, after the command of Jesus to “do this in remembrance of me,” the prayer invokes the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Intercessions conclude the prayer. The study group wondered when the Roman priest would elevate the host and the chalice. It made no sense to do so before the epiclesis. In spite of tense debate and an appeal to Pope Paul VI, the Anaphora of Saint Basil was not accepted into the postconciliar Roman Missal.

Instead, we got Eucharistic Prayer IV, a new composition influenced by the style of the Anaphora of Saint Basil, but with the epiclesis preceding the institution narrative. Although an opportunity for ecumenism was lost, the Roman Rite gained a magnificent prayer.

The fourth eucharistic prayer of the Roman Rite prepares for the story of the Last Supper with an eloquent, yet succinct survey of salvation history. Throughout, the prayer alludes to a vast array of biblical passages. The revised translation will heighten these elements. Some have found the present translation unusable because of its many gender-exclusive words. Improvements have been made. Even though some words will still meet objections, the overall presentation of biblical details should earn favorable attention.

Its most distinctive feature is the placement of the Sanctus in the middle of the section that tells about salvation history. It feels as though the preface has been split in two. This will be more evident in the revised translation because of a mistranslated word in the preface of the present translation. In the opening section, the priest acknowledges God who created all things to fill them with every blessing “and lead all men to the joyful vision of your light.” The word “men” is not in the original Latin. Its appearance in the present translation not only raised the eyebrows of those concerned with gender-exclusive language, it also introduced

the creation of humanity too early. The revised translation says, “and bring joy to many of them by the glory of your light.” The line refers to creatures in general, and animate ones in particular – but not to humanity.

The nuance is important because the next lines tell of the creation of the angels prior to the creation of humanity. The revised text will follow the logical flow of God’s creation, culminating in human life.

Once the angels enter the picture, all creation joins them in their song, the Sanctus. Many scholars think this is the way that the Sanctus entered the tradition of eucharistic prayers. The earliest evidence of the Roman Canon (4th century) did not include it. Nor did the 3rd – 4th century *Apostolic Tradition*, which provided the foundation for Eucharistic Prayer II. But other early prayers did include the Sanctus, and exactly in a place like this: within the narrative of creation and salvation, flowing naturally from the mention of the angels. Apparently this acclamation was so popular that it was then adopted by other eucharistic prayers, most notably the Roman Canon. Today it appears in all eucharistic prayers, but when we sing the Sanctus during Prayer IV, we experience the structure that probably first gave us this hymn of praise.

This is why the preface for Eucharistic Prayer IV is not to be changed. It was designed as part of a whole, and the logic will be easier to see in the revised translation. Consequently, Eucharistic Prayer IV is to be used during Ordinary Time, rather than in seasons or on feasts that carry their own preface. Eucharistic Prayers I and III have no preface of their own, so they must adopt one from the available collection. Prayer IV is in a category of its own.

The prayer addresses God as “Father” especially at the beginning and at the end. At first this may seem unremarkable because so many of the prayers at mass address God by this title. However, the revised translation is restoring whatever title for God was used in Latin, and most of the prayers of the missal address “God” or “Lord”. Consequently, the use of “Father” will be more restricted in the revised translation, but it will sound strong in Eucharistic Prayer IV, giving it a distinct flavor. Jesus favored this title especially in John’s gospel, which influenced other sections of this prayer.

In fact, the whole prayer is the most biblical one in the Roman Rite. Most of these allusions are clear in the present translation, but some will stand out more strongly. For example, “Again and again you offered a covenant” becomes “Time and again you offered them covenants” – in the plural. The reference is to the many covenants God established with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. The phrase “In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death” becomes “To accomplish your plan, he gave himself up to death.” The reference to Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9 comes out. Introducing the events of the Last Supper, the current translation says, “When the time came for him to be glorified,” while the

revised says, "For when the hour had come for him to be glorified" – a stronger connection to John 17:1. The same section today continues, "he showed the depth of his love," but the revised says, "he loved them to the end," referencing John 13:1.

When taking the chalice, the priest today says that Jesus similarly took one, "filled with wine," but the revised translation says, "filled with the fruit of the vine." This is not a mere poetic circumlocution, but a reference to Matthew 26:29 where Jesus says he will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until he drinks it with them new in the Father's kingdom. After the memorial acclamation, the priest today says, "Lord, look upon this sacrifice which you have given to your Church," and the revised says, "Look, O Lord, upon the Sacrifice which you yourself have provided for your Church." The reference is to Genesis 22:8, where Abraham tells Isaac that God himself will provide the lamb for them to offer.

With its savvy use of sacred scripture, its universal perspective of salvation, and its outreach to styles of prayer favored by other Christians East and West, Eucharistic Prayer IV is a unique contribution to the liturgy of the Roman Rite.

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