

Formation for Eucharist: Eucharistic Prayer I

The first eucharistic prayer is long, hard to follow, and ecumenically controversial. But it enjoys a long history, possesses surprising flexibility, and still stands as the first of the eucharistic prayers for use within the Roman Rite.

For many centuries, the only eucharistic prayer in the Catholic mass was the one called the Roman Canon. It was a “canon” because it was the only one legislated for use. It was “Roman” because it probably originated and developed in Rome and its empire.

The earliest record of it is in a work called “The Sacraments,” written by Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan (+397). Catholics reading that eucharistic prayer today can recognize its content, but are struck by its brevity and concision. Over the following centuries, sections were added to the beginning and the end of the prayer.

Which elements had not yet developed in the fourth century? The preface dialogue, the Sanctus, the prayers for the living, the naming of the saints, and the prayers for the dead had not yet become customary. Those were added in subsequent redactions of the canon. Their addition – by various hands and at different points of history – has made the prayer hard to follow. It does not seem to flow smoothly from start to finish.

Nor did the fourth century text possess a most significant element: the epiclesis. The priest did not explicitly ask God to send the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Eucharistic Prayer I still does not have a clear epiclesis, and this has provoked concern among Eastern Rite Churches, which hold that the consecration comes with the epiclesis in their eucharistic prayers, not with the institution narrative.

The Roman Canon developed with some flexible elements. Most noteworthy is the preface. Even as the rest of the prayer settled into a fixed form, its preface came from a collection composed to highlight seasons of the year, feast days, and other reasons for giving thanks and praise to God.

The prayer also permitted the mention of specific persons living and dead, including the names of those celebrating a certain event, such as a baptism or a wedding. On other days, such as the Octaves of Christmas and Easter, the body included another reference to the day of celebration.

All eucharistic prayers begin with the preface dialogue, but for many centuries people thought the Roman Canon began after the Sanctus. The variable preface contributed to this

misperception. In most missals, the prefaces appeared as the unit preceding the Sanctus, and then the words “Roman Canon” headed the text over the next Latin words: “Te igitur.”

That is what you would see on the right page of the open book. The left page was given over to iconography. There stood an image of the crucified Jesus. It seemed an appropriate devotional page to insert in every missal, as the priest was entering into the sacrifice of Jesus. But it originated out of a more artistic impulse. The first letter of the text on the right page, “T”, was brought to the left, where calligraphers illuminated it with complex designs, turning the T into the cross of Christ.

The revised English translation of Eucharistic Prayer I has restored this tradition. The first words of the next text will be “To you, Father,” which will enable calligraphers to design a crucifix on the facing page. There are other reasons why the new phrase will be welcome. Today the first eucharistic prayer has this: “We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving.” Shifting from “We come” to “To you” throws more emphasis on God, who deserves the attention.

The new translation has also eliminated the words “with praise and thanksgiving,” which never appeared in the Latin history of this line. They were probably inserted as a catechetical device 40 years ago, to help people understand the purpose of a eucharistic prayer. A similar insertion happened in the closing of the preface dialogue. Whereas the Latin has always had the equivalent of “It is right and just,” English-speakers have been saying, “It is right to give him thanks and praise.” During the centuries when the Roman Canon was the only eucharistic prayer in use, its purpose as a prayer of praise and thanksgiving had become obscured for various reasons. The priest was saying the text alone in a low voice, in Latin, with his back to the people. The faithful received communion infrequently. The highlight of the mass for most worshipers was the elevation of the host and the chalice, when they adored the real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine. But the meaning of the whole prayer was more complex than that. It was not so much the time to adore the real presence as it was the time to give thanks and praise to God, asking for the coming of the Holy Spirit to consecrate the elements and to sanctify the people – all in preparation for their communion.

With the Second Vatican Council, very few changes happened to the Roman Canon. Just before the Council, Pope John XXIII added Joseph to the list of the saints. This reminded the Council Fathers that the Roman Canon had undergone changes in the past and was subject to them in the present. Joseph was a noncontroversial addition – the foster Father of Jesus, and the baptismal patron of Giuseppe Roncalli, now serving as pope.

After the council, the revised Mass added a memorial acclamation to the Roman Canon. It also moved the words “the mystery of faith” from the consecration of the chalice to the

introduction of the acclamation. And it added a phrase to the consecration of the bread: “which will be given up for you.” The words appear in Luke’s gospel, and they were added to underscore the sacrificial nature of the mass.

Still, as the other eucharistic prayers developed, perceived deficiencies of the Roman Canon came to light. The canon seemed too long for the sensibilities of worshipers who would be invited to pray along with the priest as he proclaimed the text aloud in the vernacular. Its sections did not flow neatly from one to the next. The intercessions were divided at the beginning and end of the prayer. The list of saints was also broken into two parts. Besides, they included biblical and Roman saints, mostly martyrs, but did not represent the many witnesses to the faith in other cultures and times. More problematic, the intercession of the saints was not understood and accepted by other Christian groups, with whom the ecumenical movement was hoping to establish common forms of prayer. Most importantly, the absence of a clear epiclesis from the Roman Canon seemed to weaken its theological content.

All these matters were addressed in the composition of subsequent eucharistic prayers for the Roman Catholic Church. But the framers of the revised rite decided not to change the Roman Canon dramatically. It deserved respect for its antiquity, and it still stands today as a respected sign of Catholic worship’s long tradition, giving thanks and praise to God.

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