

Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Well, as you probably know, last week we took a hiatus from our walk through the Mass – I thought you all could use a break! Or more likely, I needed a break, so I was on vacation with my family at the beach. This week, we're going to move on to the second major part of the Mass, the **Liturgy of the Eucharist**.

Actually, before we even get into the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I was thinking to myself, "I wonder how many people really understand what I mean by liturgy?" Not exactly a word we use in everyday speech. Well, the word 'liturgy' literally means "public service". In a Christian sense, liturgy refers to "the sacramental worship of the Church with all of its actions and dimensions." So, basically, whenever we gather for public worship, we're gathering for liturgy. And, to speak of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is to speak of the Church's public celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ. And, in our Gospel this weekend, continuing the "Bread of Life Discourse," the Jews quarrel: "How can this man [Jesus] give us his flesh to eat?" But Jesus doesn't back down from His statement, and He doesn't try to correct their misunderstanding. Rather, He stresses, "Amen, amen I say to you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you do not have life within you."

Unless we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood – we do not have life within us! Wow! Remember how I mentioned that the first point about Mass is that we have to come... that missing Mass on purpose was still a mortal sin?... how we can't just sit at home or in nature and pray and think that substitutes for Mass? This is why! "Unless you eat His Flesh and drink my Blood, you do not have life within you!"

In the Eucharist, we come to the source and summit of our faith. Why? Well, at the Last Supper Jesus celebrated the first Eucharist. He took the bread and the cup and gave thanks. He broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take, eat, and drink: this is my body; this is the cup of my blood. Do this in memory of me.” And in offering up on Holy Thursday His very Body and Blood under the forms of bread and wine, He was establishing a connection between this Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacrifice on the cross, which He would offer definitively, once for all, the next day on Good Friday. And so, when the priest, in the person of Christ the Lord, carries out what the Lord did and handed over to His disciples to do in His memory, it is actually a re-presentation (NOT representation) – a re-presentation of the events of Calvary. This does NOT mean that we re-sacrifice Jesus again and again every time Mass is offered. Rather, in mystery, we enter into that one historical moment at Calvary, so that the gift of our salvation is made present again for us in this time and place. In this way, we are renewed in our journey of salvation, following Jesus’ command to “do this in memory of Him.” Accordingly, the Church has planned the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy around the parts corresponding to these words and actions of Christ.

Now, the first part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist is what we call the **Preparation of the Gifts**. This part of the Mass happens as the offertory collection is taken up – when we offer our financial contributions as a “sacrifice” to God.

During the Preparation of the Gifts, the altar is prepared by arranging various items. After the altar is set, the gifts of bread and wine, along with our parish collection, are brought forward by a couple people who represent the whole assembly. And, by the way, in case you didn't know, as you enter the double glass doors of the church, on the right side, there is a container with three crosses in it. Those who take these crosses are the volunteers at that particular Mass to bring up the gifts. Anyone, including entire families, are invited to take these crosses and bring up the gifts.

The priest then prepares the gifts. In preparing the chalice, he mixes water and wine, and there is a silent prayer that the priest says here – listen to this – “By the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.” In other words, just as God took flesh in the person of Jesus Christ in order to share *our* humanity so that He could offer Himself on the Cross, so does He now give us this Eucharist, so that we, by eating His Body and Blood, could share in *His* divinity. Poof!

Then, after the priest prays the **Prayer over the Offerings**, we come to the central part of the Mass, the **Eucharistic Prayer**. There is no way that I can do justice to this part of the Mass in just one part of a single homily, but here goes anyway. The Eucharistic Prayer begins with the **Preface**. In fact, just as a book usually has a preface to tell you a little of what it's about, so does the Eucharistic Prayer, which is the true story of Jesus' Body and Blood given for us!

To this Preface, we then respond by singing, the **Holy, Holy, Holy**, or the “Sanctus” in Latin, as it is also called. (‘Sanctus’ is the Latin word for “holy”). Then, the entire congregation kneels in reverence for this prayer of thanksgiving by which the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Indeed, the word ‘Eucharist’ comes from the Greek word which literally means “thanksgiving”. And are we ever thankful for God’s greatest gift to us – His Son!

Now, there are actually several Eucharistic Prayers which the priest may choose from at any given Mass – 13 to be exact. The earliest of these comes from the 2nd century – that’s the 100s AD! And even though the words of all the Eucharistic Prayers are different, they all follow a similar pattern. They begin acknowledging God’s goodness: “You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness.” This leads to the **Epiclesis**, when the priest sticks his hands out like Superman over the bread and wine, and the altar server rings the bells. This action and the words prayed, calls down the Holy Spirit to accomplish the miracle that is about to take place.

Following this, come the Institution Narrative and the Consecration. The **Institution Narrative** is when the priest, standing in the person of Jesus Christ, repeats the exact words Jesus did at the Last Supper. It’s at this moment of the Mass, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that the **Consecration** takes place – that is the miracle of the bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Now, all of the Gospels agree that Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal when He instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The Passover was the great Jewish feast that God instituted on the eve of Israel's flight from slavery in Egypt, as they passed through the Red Sea into freedom. We call this the Exodus from Egypt. This is significant – because for us as Christians, Jesus is now the New Exodus, freeing us from the bondage and captivity to sin. And like the blood of the lamb smeared on the door-posts of the Jews at the Passover, which protected them from the angel of death, so does Jesus, the Lamb of God, give us His Blood and Body to protect and save us from eternal death. The Eucharist, then, is the New Passover – allowing us to “pass over” from death to new and eternal life.

Well, immediately after the Consecration comes the **Anamnesis**, literally “the remembering”, by which the Church calls to mind, or remembers, what Jesus has done, and is doing, to save us. This happens right after I sing “The mystery of faith” and you sing your response, like: “We proclaim your Death of Lord...”

The rest of the Eucharistic Prayer, then, is a series of intercessions, making it clear that the Eucharist is celebrated in union with the whole Church and all its members. And to conclude this great prayer of the Church, the priest then sings the final **Doxology**, to which the sing the **Great Amen**. “Amen”, the Hebrew word which means “let it be so” or “I agree”.

Now, our meal – our sacrifice – is prepared. And in the **Communion Rite**, which we'll cover next week, in addition to the **Concluding Rites** of the Mass, we make our immediate preparations to receive the very Bread of Life. God bless you.