

VI. “Lift up your hearts!”

Part One

The Eucharistic Prayer – Center and Summit

“Lift up your hearts” is part of the introductory dialogue of the great prayer of thanksgiving of the Mass – *the Eucharistic Prayer*. This prayer is the heart of the action that we call the Eucharist:

“Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: the Eucharistic Prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving...” (GIRM 78)

Let’s be honest right off the bat. Not all Catholics experience this prayer as the “center and summit of the entire celebration.” It certainly is curious how many seem to “go somewhere else” during the prayer. Here are some ideas to help us all attend prayerfully to the Eucharistic Prayer.

A Brief Historical Excursus – Jewish Table Prayer

Scholarship has shown that our Eucharistic Prayers are related thematically and structurally to Jewish Table Prayers dating from the time of Jesus. It’s striking that, though the Last Supper/Passover tradition informed the Synoptic gospel memory of Jesus’ meal before he suffered and died, his meals with sinners give us the underlying structure for our Eucharistic praying.

We can get a picture of how Jesus probably prayed at the meals he shared with sinners in the saying, “Catholics bless food, while Jews bless God.”

Jewish families gave **praise** to God at meals by narrating the great deeds of God – above all, the act of creation. Telling God’s creation of heavens, earth, seas, land, and all living creatures gives praise to God. [Note the great narrative psalms of the Bible (e.g., Psalms 103-6)].

Reciting the saving deeds of God – Exodus from Egypt and return from Exile – renders **thanks** for divine redemption of Israel.

Prayers of **petition** for the peace of Jerusalem and for other concerns sets the family in right relation to God saying, in effect, we cannot make everything right or whole. We place all in your hands.

And the meal itself not only signified **reconciliation** but brought it about. Only those welcomed to dine could recline at table with the family. Thus, Jesus’ banquets with sinners reconciled them to him *and* created a new family around him.

[FYI: Eucharistic prayers of the West stress thanksgiving for redemption; the East weaves praise for creation into its thanksgiving.]

The presider at a Roman Catholic liturgy narrates the great saving deeds God has done for us and the salvation given us in and through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This occurs primarily in what is called the *Preface*, the narrative which goes before the *Holy, Holy, Holy*. Thanksgiving for redemption is fundamental to our Eucharistic praying.

We remember and thank the Father for the mysteries of Christ’s life – Incarnation, death & resurrection, sending of the Spirit – and offer gratitude for how God was revealed in the lives of Mary, Joseph, apostles, martyrs, religious, & priests...

A Brief Historical Excursus – The Oral Tradition

The written record of Eucharistic Prayers begins in the early 3rd century. Previously, tradition holds that bishops composed them extemporaneously. This does not mean that presiders verbally wandered aimlessly hither, thither, and yon. Rather, they were grounded in and built upon the structure of praise, thanksgiving, and intercession, as is evidenced in the earliest *written* Eucharistic Prayers.

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place... When our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, *and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen...*” (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 67)

Praying the Eucharistic Prayer Today, I

The *General Instruction* helps us appreciate the various meanings and purposes of the prayer in order that we might enter into it with greater heart...

“The priest invites the people to *lift up their hearts* to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving...”

The prayer begins with a tripartite dialogue whose purpose is to unite the presider with the people in prayer and thanksgiving. This act of uniting signifies the presence of the Church praying with the Risen Christ.

... he unites them with himself in the prayer which, in the name of the entire community, he addresses to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit...” (GIRM 78)

And the intention of the praying calls presider and people to continue to grow in the capacity for uniting in awareness of the thanks being offered.

On the one hand, a fairly large part of the burden is placed directly on the presider that he “unite [the faithful] with himself.” This is not meant to be a metaphysical or theoretical ‘uniting’ only, but done in a way that, together, the entire Church at prayer experiences its oneness. I find it helpful for the presider to pray the prayer deliberately and with substantial pauses to allow and welcome the faithful into the meaning of the words.

Let’s acknowledge the challenges with full, active, and conscious participation here: It appears that the faithful’s several interventions with spoken or sung acclamations passes for “full, active, and conscious participation.” At the same time, many still experience the EP as *the priest’s prayer only*. Let’s continue to unpack GIRM’s understanding of the EP.

The bishops of Vatican II understood how important it is that the Mystical Body of Christ joins attentively with the Risen Christ in giving thanks to the Father in the Spirit for redemption of the human race.

The liturgy, then, is rightly seen
*as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ...
In it full public worship is performed by
the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is,
by the Head and his members.*

From this it follows that every liturgical celebration,
*because it is an action
of Christ the Priest and of his Body,
which is the Church,*
is a sacred action surpassing all others.
(*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7*)

Please listen to the Eucharistic Prayer next time and attend to the many occurrences of the word, “we,” “us,” and “our” in the Eucharistic Prayer.

For Presiders & Assembly: A Brief Excursus on *Pace and Attention*

Can we talk? Many presiders fly through this prayer at a pace that few, except perhaps the presider himself, can follow. Some seem to try to make up time for having given a long homily. Others seem to speed through if in order to dampen the impact of the prayer’s soporific effect on his congregation. Still others seem to hurry in order to avoid parishioners’ criticism for Mass going too long.

Meanwhile, the faithful often doze and the Eucharistic Prayer never attains its full stature as the “center and summit” of the liturgy in real time.

An understanding grasp of the meaning and purpose of the praying may lead us to a deeper awareness of it as “center and summit.” That is, it will take the presider’s own prayerful comprehension of the prayer *as well as* the attentive and receptive hearing by the People of God that the Eucharistic

Prayer come alive as the “summit and source” of the celebration.

Praying the Eucharistic Prayer Today, II

One final image as we lean into the GIRM: The Body of Christ in the world, drawn together as one by the Spirit, stands (at the *Preface*) united with the presider to the Risen Christ to pour ourselves out to the Father in thanksgiving for the *magnalia dei*, the great deeds God has done for us in redemption.

“... Furthermore, the meaning of the prayer is that
*the entire congregation of the faithful
should join itself with Christ
in confessing the great things God has done
and in offering the sacrifice...* (GIRM 78)

The very meaning and purpose of the praying is for the presider, uniting with the faithful as the entire congregation of the Church, to “confess the great things God has done.” Confession means narration of the *magnalia dei*, the divine deeds of redemption. [How does the liturgy prepare us to remember God’s saving deeds and celebrate the Eucharist *worthily* at this moment?]

What does the *General Instruction* seek to accomplish in this last note?

The Eucharistic Prayer demands that *all* listen to it with reverence and in silence.” (GIRM 78)

How can both priest and assembly create the very ‘conditions for the possibility’ that this prayer might actually be experienced as the “summit and source?”

Parts of the Eucharistic Prayer – 1st Installment

The GIRM tells us the meaning of the various parts of this prayer. We begin this week with the *Preface*:

I. Thanksgiving – the *Preface*

The *Preface* is the part of this prayer that changes from Sunday to Sunday, or from season to season. The entire Church stands to thank God for *magnalia dei*:

“Thanksgiving (expressed especially in the **preface**):
*... in the name of the entire holy people,
the priest glorifies God the Father
and gives thanks for the whole work of salvation
or for some special aspect of it that corresponds to the
day, festivity, or season.”* (GIRM 79a)

This is the fourth in a series of articles about the liturgy.
Article #7 will present *Lift Up Your Hearts*.