

Believe Celebrate Live **THE EUCHARIST**

Gathering

In this time to *Believe, Celebrate, Live the Eucharist*, we all have an opportunity to reflect on the rich mysteries of our faith, with a focus on our greatest prayer, the Mass. As you might expect, we start at the beginning: with the gathering of the assembly, the entrance procession, and the opening song.

Called to Worship

“It’s Sunday morning. You decide to go to Mass. Or rather, God decides for you. God draws each of us out of our solitude and isolation, and makes us into a people that lives by faith and whose unity is Christ,” writes Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the recently deceased Archbishop of Paris. “Yes, we should consider it a grace of God to have been ‘chosen’ to be members of the People of God, ‘to serve in his presence,’ to be gathered into his Church, the Body of Christ” (Lustiger, *La Messe*, p. 11). We come to Mass not because we happen to have the time or because we feel like it or because we have to. We come in response to a call. In coming to Mass, Sunday after Sunday, we are letting ourselves be gathered by God.

When God’s people are thus gathered together, God’s Church is made visible. Many diverse individuals become something altogether new. They become one community entrusted with a task that no one else can accomplish for them: to be the body of Christ in this place, at this time. The whole is truly greater than its parts.

The Entrance

The entrance procession doesn’t begin with the entrance hymn! Perhaps you could say it begins at mid-afternoon Saturday, or very early on Sunday morning, when someone arrives to turn on the lights

and open the doors. This great procession continues as the faithful arrive from every direction—on foot, by car, by bus, by taxi, by van, maybe even by boat—to greet one another and take their places in the church. This is the great entrance procession; the vested ministers simply conclude it. The formal entrance is an emblem of what has already begun to happen. We see in it a people ceasing to be a civic or other kind of community, and becoming a liturgical one. But, of course, there is more, because the procession is not just about us. It’s about Christ’s living presence in our midst. As the cross enters the church, we stand—the simplest possible gesture, and yet a powerful sign of attention and respect. We’ve already seen that it is the living God who gathers us here, though we may think we arrive under our own steam. The cross leads us, and the solemn, deliberate pace reminds us that the pilgrim people of God have nothing to fear. Their destination is sure and their guide cannot go astray. Candles are signs of a living presence, and the candles carried with the cross remind us that the cross we adore is a living cross, a flowering tree, both alive and life-giving.

The procession points to other signs of Christ as well. Servers carry candles around the Book of the Gospels, because, as the Second Vatican Council teaches us, “Christ himself speaks when the scriptures are proclaimed in the Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [CSL] #7*). The priest presiding over the celebration is another sign of Christ’s presence. This is perhaps most obvious in the vestments he wears. One fourth-century Christian commentator wrote, “Their outer garb is more sublime than they are”; the priest-president “does not wear his usual

clothing nor does he wear his ordinary outer garment; a vestment of fine, bright linen envelops him” (Quoted in Martimort, *Principles of the Liturgy*, p. 189). The vestment is an outward sign of an interior reality, the sacrament by which the priest is enabled to act *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, in the celebration of the Eucharist. The priest is the last to enter, for when he “joins the celebrating community, the Church, the Body of the risen Lord, with its head and its members, is signified in its totality” (Deiss, *The Mass*, p. 17).

A splendid entrance

Hippo, North Africa, Easter Sunday, 426.

Two young people, a brother and sister, have been miraculously cured. “On all sides, the church was filled with cries of joy and thanksgiving. We came forward toward the people. The church was full: it resounded with cries of joy: Thanks be to God! Praise be to God! No one stays quiet; from the right, from the left, rose up cries! I greeted the people. The acclamation started again with redoubled intensity. Finally silence was established, and the passage from the Holy Scriptures was read which dealt with the feast” (St. Augustine, as quoted in Deiss, p. 16).

Powerful Songs

The song that accompanies the entrance of the ministers is an essential part of the gathering of the people of God. It doesn’t simply set the mood or explain the theme of the day (though it can do both of these); it accomplishes something. The song is the first activity of the community gathered in Christ, who is present when the Church prays and sings (*CSL* #7). Communal singing sounds like unity, and it helps to bring it about as well. As the people join together in song, says Cardinal Lustiger, “a communion of prayer and adoration is formed between men and women until then separated and often strangers to one another.

Together, with one heart, they begin to sing to God, the same acclamation or supplication” (Lustiger, p. 31). Some of us sing with trained beauty—most of us sing with natural beauty—but at Mass, we all sing. As the great Methodist preacher and composer John Wesley said in his “Directions for Singing” (1761), “Sing . . . let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If singing is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing. Sing lustily and with a good courage” (Preface to *Sacred Melody*). Wesley knew that those who have sung and prayed together are no longer strangers: they have begun to experience their oneness in Christ. St. Augustine felt the same way. “How I wept,” he wrote, “deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face—tears that did me good” (*Confessions*, as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1157).

The Power of Sunday

It is the year 304. The Emperor Diocletian has forbidden Christians, on pain of death, to read the scriptures, to celebrate the Eucharist, or to build places of worship. Nevertheless, one Sunday morning, some Christians are found breaking the bread together in a private home in Abitene, a village in present-day Tunisia. All forty-nine of them are arrested and dragged before the imperial authorities at Carthage. The proconsul interrogates them, asking how they dare to defy the orders of the Emperor. One of the Christians, Emeritus by name, replies simply, “*Sine dominico non possumus.*” Without Sunday, we cannot live.

The Sign of the Cross

At the very beginning of Mass, all members of the assembly—the priest along with the people—bless

themselves with the sign of the cross. “The most basic Christian gesture in prayer is and always will be the sign of the Cross,” wrote Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) in 2000. “It is a way of confessing Christ crucified with one’s very body.” In making the sign of the cross as we begin our liturgical celebrations, not hastily, but slowly and with reverent awareness, we say, without uttering a word, who we really are; we utter “a visible and public Yes to him who suffered for us” (Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 177).

The sign of the cross is also a statement of belief, our most fundamental one: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We profess our faith in and invoke the protection of the blessed Trinity. These words also recall the sacrament that has gathered us into God’s family and brought us together in prayer and praise—the sacrament of baptism—for each of us was baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Thus from the very beginning of Mass, we pray in the awareness of the cross of Christ, of the saving sacrifice it represents, and of our own share in that sacrifice through baptism. The liturgy leads us to the cross and, through it, to the peace of his resurrection; it does not lead us to Christ’s peace in order to avoid the cross.

The Greeting

“The Lord be with you.” This is not merely a liturgical way of saying “Good morning” or “How are you?” Rather, these simple formulas express the foundational mystery of the Mass: that Christ is with us and makes us one. Cardinal Lustiger referred to it as an abbreviation of our entire covenant with God as it was made with Moses: The people divinely chosen as God’s own were given the gift of God’s own presence. It is a reminder, too, of those farewell words of Jesus: “Behold, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). In confidence, then, the Church and its ministers can express their desire for the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord to be with and among everyone.

Penitential Rite

“The Church . . . clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964). In the penitential rite, the Church itself, in its members, asks forgiveness and praises the God of mercy. This rite is not a “mini-confession,” nor are we expected to do an extensive examination of conscience at this moment in the Mass. This rite is not “a type of doormat where we wipe our feet before entering the sanctuary of God’s holiness,” as Lucien Deiss memorably puts it (Deiss, pp. 22, 24). We do not simply get the penitential part of the Mass out of the way before moving on to the joy of the Gloria. For the rhythm of penance and praise that we hear in the penitential rite will be repeated over and over in the Mass. Forgiveness, after all, is at the very heart of the Eucharist; at the moment of the consecration we hear that Christ’s blood was shed so that sins would be forgiven.

There are several different forms for the penitential rite. First is the Confiteor (“I confess to Almighty God . . .”). In this great prayer of confession, which we recite together, each one of us in the first person, we acknowledge that sin is not only personal, it is communal. The wrong I do diminishes me, and it diminishes the community of which I am a part. So I acknowledge that I have sinned in thought, in word, in action, and in failure to act—before God and before “my brothers and sisters.” And I invoke the prayers of the Mother of God and the whole communion of angels and saints.

The penitential rite can also take the form of a litany, with invocations addressed to Christ, with the response “Lord, have mercy,” or, in Greek, *Kyrie eleison*. These invocations are less about us—our failures and shortcomings—than they are bursts of praise for the incredible mercy of God in Jesus Christ. “You came to call sinners.” “You plead for us.”

“You heal the wounds of sin and division.” “You bring pardon and peace.” “You bring light to those in darkness.” “You give us yourself.” “You raise us to new life.” We are reminded that God—like the father of the prodigal son—runs to meet us when we turn homeward, even if, like that lost son, we are still a long way off.

The penitential rite can sometimes be replaced with a sprinkling rite, which powerfully reminds us of our baptism. The prayers for the blessing of water are also prayers for forgiveness. “Renew the living spring of your life within us that we may be free from sin.” “Bless this water: as we use it in faith forgive our sins and save us from all illness and the power of evil . . . admit us to your presence in purity of heart” (*Roman Missal*). In a way, the penitential rite is always a sprinkling rite, in the sense that no matter which form this rite takes it is a reminder of baptism—the first sacrament of forgiveness.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo

Immediately following the absolution, the Gloria bursts into the liturgy. The Gloria is among the most ancient songs of the Christian people. It began as a hymn for the office of Morning Prayer, but gradually made its way into the Mass. At first it was sung only by bishops on special occasions (particularly Christmas); but gradually it came to be sung by all the people on all Sundays, except in Advent and Lent.

The Gloria is a hymn, an ode, “a symphony,” as Lucien Deiss calls it, in which the “dominant note . . . is the jubilation of praise” (Deiss, p. 24). It begins with the song the angels sang on the first Christmas night—“Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth”—and then comes a kind of rhapsody, as words and phrases spill over one another from the overflowing joy of our hearts. The text is very rich. It seems to be trying to exhaust the very vocabulary of praise: *Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te. Gratias agimus tibi.* We praise,

bless, adore, glorify, give thanks! No single word can adequately express the response of the Christian people to the good news of the Incarnation.

The movement of this great ode, as many have observed, echoes the movement of the Eucharistic Prayer itself. The opening rhapsody turns to a meditation on Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; from the glory of the angels’ song we descend to the depths of Jesus’ sacrifice, and our praise becomes supplication: “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us . . . receive our prayer.”

In the last part of this hymn, we rise up again with the risen Jesus, saying three times, “You alone,” “You alone,” “You alone.” We conclude with a splendid trinitarian expression of faith, and end where we began, “in the glory of God the Father.”

In baptism, we are all given a vocation to praise: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood . . . that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God who called you out of darkness into marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9), and declaring God’s mighty deeds is precisely what the Gloria does. It is a prayer of “marvelous light” that at the same time recalls the shadows, the “darkness” out of which God called us. The Gloria, Cardinal Lustiger writes, “is truly a treasure that can nourish our personal prayer as well as our community prayer” (Lustiger, p. 54).

The Opening Prayer: The “Collect”

Following the Gloria comes the opening prayer, also called the collect, because this prayer “collects” or gathers the prayers of the community into one. These prayers are simple and short, in the spirit of the noble simplicity that is characteristic of our Roman rite liturgy. The collect follows a very clear plan. It begins with the invitation to prayer. This is followed by a period of silent prayer (see below). Then comes the spoken prayer, which first calls upon the Father (“God our Father”), then gives thanks (“your light of truth guides us to the way of Christ”),

then requests (“May all who follow him reject what is contrary to the Gospel”), and then, using one of several formulas, invokes the Christ who said that whatever we asked of the Father in his name would be given to us.

Within this pattern—which almost never varies—the Church provides an amazing diversity of prayers (there are nearly two thousand of them in the Missal). They are well worth listening to. As we listen, we can meditate in our hearts: “By these words spoken by the priest, it is I who pray in the name of the Church, and the Church that prays in my name” (Lustiger, p. 62).

Liturgical Silence

In the course of the Mass, the liturgy calls for seven moments of silence. Two of these take place at the very beginning: following the invitation to the penitential rite, and following the “Let us pray” of the collect. These moments of silence are not there to give the priest-president a chance to turn the page,

or so that servers can get back to their places, or so readers can get to the ambo, or so latecomers can find seats. Rather, these silences provide some of the most significant moments for the assembly’s full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy. They give us time to orient ourselves, to bring our own needs and concerns, our regrets, hopes, and prayers, to this liturgy, at this time, and to unite them with the prayer of the community. This is not the kind of silence in which we empty our minds of thought, let distractions fade away, and simply be (though there is surely a place for that kind of silence in our lives). Rather, we are given this silence in order to fill it with the intensity of our silent prayer. This is a charged silence. In the course of the Mass, this silence takes on many different shades, as it were. Silence can be filled with repentance, with love and thanksgiving, with reflection and meditation, with supplication. But liturgical silence is never empty.

Without Sunday, we cannot live

In a homily on May 29, 2005, closing the 24th Italian Eucharistic Congress, Pope Benedict XVI told the story of the Abitene martyrs (see above), and said, “The Sunday precept is not . . . an externally imposed duty, a burden on our shoulders. On the contrary, taking part in the celebration, being nourished by the Eucharistic bread and experiencing the communion of their brothers and sisters in Christ is a need for Christians, it is a joy; Christians can thus replenish the energy they need to continue the journey. . . . We must rediscover the joy of Christian Sundays. We must proudly rediscover the privilege of sharing in the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the renewed world.”

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050529_bari_en.html