

**Lift Up Your Hearts:
Eucharist and the Eucharistic Prayer**

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April

*We need to live in Thanksgiving, which supposes a soul
experiencing the joy of the Lord's gifts and blessings.*

To Mrs. Lepage

March 17, 1867

Preface

One of the most unique insights of Father Peter Julian Eymard was his belief that adoration (prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament) flows from the celebration of the Eucharist. In his life and in his writings, Father Eymard taught that the structure of our adoration prayer should be based on the “four ends” (movements) of the mass: a prayer of praise, thanksgiving, reparation and petition.

Introduction to the Theme

During our time together we are going to look at an aspect of the Eucharist that is, in a way, quite familiar to us, yet which until now may not have played a very significant role in our life of faith: the central moment of the Mass - the Eucharistic Prayer.

So much attention has been paid in the past to the repetition of our Lord's words over the bread and wine that we tend to forget that these words find their setting *in a prayer*. It also has often been regarded as the priest's prayer, rather than the prayer of the people. In reality, the priest voices it in the name of all; it is the prayer of the whole people assembled for Eucharist.

We are going to see in this session that this prayer is in itself very important. It expresses the fundamentals of Christian faith and the basic attitude of the believer towards life. As such, it can be a model for all of our prayers, whether those we say with others or the spontaneous prayers we make in the course of our daily life.

Opening Prayer

Living and life-giving God,
Holy One and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we bless and praise you,
and we give you thanks for having brought us together
in order to deepen our understanding
of all you've done for us.
We bless you especially for the gift of the Eucharist
by which we learn to be thankful and to praise you.

We remember tonight many holy people,
our brothers and sisters in faith,
from Abraham and Sarah to Saint Teresa of Calcutta and Saint Oscar Romero.
Witnesses to your presence in the heart of human existence,
they have taught us to respond to your love
in praise and gratitude and service.

Not only did you reveal yourself to our forebearers
and bestow upon them the inestimable gift
of your enlightening and saving word;
you also taught them how to respond to you in prayer and praise.
You taught them to bless you at all times,
whether in happiness or in sorrow,
and to thank you in every circumstance,
but especially at meals
which sustain our life and build up our relationships.

You gave us Jesus, your own son,
to show us how to live each day in gratitude and praise,
to conduct ourselves with wisdom,
and to pray to you for all our needs.
In response to his disciples' request, he left us a model of prayer.
Above all, though, on the night of his passing over
from this world to your heavenly realm,
he gave us the Eucharist.
In doing so he revealed to us
how love and self-offering
can transform sinfulness and the terrible violence it engenders
into new life,
and so redeem our suffering and disfigured world,

bringing it back into its true shape
and revealing it in all its beauty.

Holy Father, be with us
with your guiding and enlightening Spirit.
Open our eyes so that,
like the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
we may discover Jesus in the breaking of bread,
and especially in the prayer of blessing and thanks,
the Eucharistic Prayer.
Lift up our hearts and enlighten our minds
so that we may make it the very pattern of our own praying.

May our search and our sharing
make our hearts to burn within us
as we walk the way together,
and may we meet the risen Lord once more
and be guided in joy to the light of his kingdom. Amen.

Song

“Our Blessing Cup” by Bob Herd, Music Issue of Today’s Missal – Oregon Catholic Press.

Work Exercise

1. At the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer is a particular attitude towards life and a way of responding to all that happens to us. How do you tend to respond to events in your life? When you pray spontaneously, what form does your prayer usually take?

2. In the Scriptures we can find many examples of how people prayed; we might think of Mary's prayer when she visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:46 ff.) or of the prayer Jesus made when his disciples returned from their first mission (cf. Luke 10:17-22). Saint Paul's letters (eg. Ephesians 1:3-11) too are full of examples of spontaneous outbursts of prayer. What features of these biblical prayers most strike you? In what ways might they aid or add to your own way of praying?

3. The Eucharistic Prayer constitutes the central moment of the Eucharistic celebration. How would you describe this prayer? What features of this prayer inspire your own prayer life?

The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.

Teaching

1. The stories of the Last Supper tell us that Jesus said the customary grace, first over the bread at the beginning of the meal and then over the cup at the end (1 Corinthians 11:24; Luke 22:19; Mark 14:22; Matthew 29:26). The texts do not tell us what Jesus actually said, apart from the special words he used over the bread and the wine (declaring that they were his body and blood). Nor do we know for certain what formulas were most commonly used at the time. It is probable, anyway, that Jesus used some freedom, for it was not unusual at the time for the one praying to improvise to some extent.
2. The Jewish meal prayers grew out of an ancient form of prayer known as the “blessing” (in Hebrew, the *berakah*). The idea was not to bless the food, as though it needed to be made holy, but to bless God who had provided nourishment for his people. Blessing is for us; it is we who need to bless God in order to remind ourselves that all we have is his gift. Such a prayer gives public recognition to God as the giver of life. This is an ancient form of prayer to which the rabbis attached great importance. In many ways, it expressed the very core of Jewish biblical spirituality, so much so that one writer, Louis Bouyer, has called the *berakah* “the knowledge of God in the hearts of the people.”
3. The faithful Jew was supposed to bless God for all that occurred in his or her life, from waking in the morning to retiring at night. For God was believed to be present in all that was experienced, and the believer should bless him for all that happens, for good things as well as painful ones, for joy as well as sorrow. By means of the blessing people remembered God as One who is ever present to us and always benevolent. Among the biblical examples, the prayer of Abraham’s servant (Genesis 24:27) is worth quoting, as are those of Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro (Exodus 18:9-10), and of Ezra (Nehemiah 9:5-15); quite striking is the prayer of Jesus on the return of his disciples from their first mission (Matthew 11:25-27; Luke 10:21-22).
4. Meals, which are a particular sign of God’s provident care, were an especially solemn occasion for blessing God. In the blessings God was acknowledged as King or Lord of the universe, and especially in the final blessing over the cup, the many wonderful blessings received from God also are remembered, above all the covenant, the land, Jerusalem and its temple, life itself, and food. This blessing concluded with a prayer that God would have mercy on his people and realize his promises. At great feasts, but especially Passover time, the remembering went back to creation itself and the prayer looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. It was this kind of prayer that Jesus seems to have chosen for the Eucharist.
5. In referring to these prayers, the New Testament uses two different Greek words, and the Eucharistic Prayer preserves the particular emphasis of each. The first meant to bless and

to praise (our word *eulogy* comes from this term), while the other meant rather to give thanks (that is, *eucharist*).

It is this second term that was soon used to characterize the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper, but always with the element of praise as well. Some years after the Lord's resurrection the strictly eucharistic celebration of the community was disengaged from the meal of which it had been a part, and these two grace prayers, no longer separated by the main part of the meal, were combined into one. Little by little they took the form of the Eucharistic Prayers as we know them today.

The prayers we use at the Eucharist, modelled on such Jewish prayers, express our praise and thanks for what God has done for us, above all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They enshrine the Christian's most fundamental beliefs and attitudes towards life. We see this verified very clearly in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Saint Paul. His letters are filled with thanksgiving and praise of God (Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:3-11), and he invites his readers always to give thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Ephesians 5:20). This is the very heart of a Christian spirituality.

6. In learning to shape our lives, and especially our attitudes according to the Eucharist, we need to understand the importance of the Eucharistic Prayer. For many centuries now we have had a one-sided understanding of this prayer. With attention focused on the words of Jesus over the bread and wine we forget that the Eucharist was more than these words and that the prayer had its own importance. We came to think of it as something belonging to the priest, whereas it is everyone's prayer, to which the priest gives voice with and in the name of us all.

That is why it begins with a dialogue inviting all to lift up their hearts and to give thanks; by responding and by singing the acclamations and the "amen," we publicly make it our own. In a sense though, the prayer remains incomplete unless we personalize it in our own hearts, adding our own motives for gratitude and praise.

*Note: The leader may wish to distribute the "Second Eucharistic Prayer" at this point.
Or go to "Catholic Resources - RM3-EP1-4")*

7. We will understand this prayer if we get a clear grasp of its essential shape. There are various ways we can divide it, but the simplest way to look at it is to see two parts, which reflect the two basic phases of the prayer.

The first part begins with the so-called "preface," which is always concerned in some way with history. For the biblical God is a God who makes himself known in people's lives. In

a movement of thankful remembering and praise God's great saving acts are recalled, culminating with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This part concludes with the Last Supper story in fulfillment of the Lord's command to "do this in remembrance of" of him.

In the second part, the movement of the prayer shifts from remembering to invocation, becoming a prayer of request. Essentially, we ask that what God brought about in the paschal mystery of Jesus, he may do now in our midst. We pray that we too may share in Jesus' body and blood, be spiritually nourished, and become changed so as to be more like him in our minds and hearts and behavior.

8. We can look at the prayer from other standpoints as well, for example, by dividing it into three parts, each focusing more particularly on the activity of one of the divine persons (even though, of course, all three are always active together). The first part, beginning with the practice, focuses on what God the Father has done in our history. The second part focuses on God the Son, Jesus Christ. The third, the invocation or prayer of petition, focuses on the work of God the Holy Spirit.
9. The final step is to see in what way the Eucharistic Prayer can be a model for our own praying. Basically, it is a matter of grasping the simple, underlying pattern we have mentioned - namely the movement from thankful remembering to prayer or petition. First, though, it is good to remind ourselves how we can become more actively involved in the prayer when we are at Mass, not only by attending to the words of the prayer when it is prayed, but especially by bringing our own reasons for thanksgiving and praise to the prayer that the presider is reciting.

As for our own daily living, making the Eucharistic Prayer the pattern of our own praying means above all learning to respond to God in all the little things that happen to us in life by means of short prayers in which we remember events that have occurred, praising and giving thanks to God and asking God to realize his promises in our own lives, as well as asking for what we need in order to serve him, to love others, and to be faithful to our commitments.

Closing Prayer

(In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament if possible)

Opening Song: "Our Blessing Cup"

By Bob Hurd, Music Issue of Today's Missal - Oregon Catholic Press

First Reading: Nehemiah 9: 5-8

The Levites Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah said, "Arise, bless the Lord, your God, from eternity to eternity!" The Israelites answered with the blessing, "Blessed is your glorious name and exalted above all blessing and praise." Then Ezra said, "It is you, O Lord, you are the only one; you made the heavens, the highest heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the heavenly hosts bow down before you.

"You, O Lord, are the God who chose Abram, who brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and named him Abraham. When you had found his heart faithful in your sight, you made the covenant with him to give to him and his posterity the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Girgashites. These promises of yours you fulfilled, for you are just."

Period of Silence

Second Reading: Luke 22: 14-20

When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for, I tell you, I shall not eat it (again) until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; for I tell you (that) from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you."

Period of Silence

Intercessory Prayer

Closing Prayer

Living and life-giving God.
Holy One and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we bless and praise you
and give you thanks for having brought us together
in order to deepen our understanding
of all you have done for us.
We bless you especially for the gift of the Eucharist
by which we learn to be thankful
and to praise you.
Amen.

Dismissal with some sign of peace