Home Retreat, 15th October, 2022

The Eucharistic Prayers

I thought it would be an aid to devotion and prayer to consider the prayers of the eucharist. At present there are four eucharistic prayers current in the Western Church, each with a different origin and drawn from different traditions within the Church, each having a slightly different emphasis. Before, however, investigating these I think it is important to put certain cards on the table.

For me, and I think this is a common attitude among Christians in the Catholic tradition, there are two important emphases in the prayer of the Eucharist, viz., the commemoration and actualization of the saving sacrifice of Jesus, of which his prayer and gestures at the Last Supper were a foretelling symbol, and secondly our own commitment to share in his saving covenant.

Basic Emphases

To this I think we need to add two more emphases, unity and thanksgiving, which feature strongly from the beginning of the Eucharist. One (unity)is earthly, the other (thanksgiving) heavenly. The earthly emphasis is on the unity of the Church. It is the principal emphasis given by St Paul in his mention of the eucharist at Corinth. There his whole teaching is centred on reproach for the disunity shown by the contempt of the rich who bring their food and devour it without attention to the poor who find themselves more or less excluded. He says: 'So when you come together it is not to eat the Lord's supper. Do you not have houses for eating and drinking? Or do you despise the Church of God and shame those who have nothing. Should I praise you? In this I do not praise you.' (1 Cor 11.21-23). The same accent is given by the brief prayer at the eucharist itself in the Didache 9.4, the earliest Christian writing apart from the New Testament: 'Just as this broken loaf was scattered over the hills and having been gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together.' Each of the modern EPs has this emphasis on the unity of the Church, reflecting the prayer for the unity of the Church which is so strong in the prayer of Jesus in Jn 17, at the end of the Last Supper that they may all be one. We hve not preserved this unity for which Christ prayed, and it is especially important at this moment in time when the Churches, Catholic and Protestant, Western and Estern are beginning to come closer together.

The other dominant emphasis which I called the heavenly emphasis is a mixture of praise of the holiness of God and of thanks for the salvation won by Christ. To the Hebrew mind the two, praise and thanks, are indistinguishable. If you find this surprising, think of the child at the foot of the Christmas tree, enthusiastically showing off the new toy and its performance to everyone, but always with an eye on the donor for his or her reaction. In the Eucharist this comes to view in various ways, firstly the name of the rite in itself means 'thanksgiving'. The common word for 'thank you' even in modern Greek is '*Efcharisto*' ευχαριστω. The Last Supper of Jesus was built on the Passover meal which in itself is a massive thanksgiving for all the great wonders of the lord in the Old Testament, but principally the night of the escape from Egypt and the adoption of Israel as the Lord's own people in the forty

years in the desert of Sinai. The explanatory speech given by the father of the household in a modern Passover seder in response to the question 'Why is this night not like other nights?' is in the form of a *Berachah*, which means 'blessing' or 'thanksgiving', two closely interrelated concepts. This emphasis is obviously permanent in the eucharistic prayers. It features in the dialogue by which the prayer is prefaced, the exchange between priest and people climaxes in 'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God' before launching into the Preface. This has been so from the earliest eucharistic prayer which we have, that of Hippolytus in about 225. The prayer of thanks continues with, 'We thank you, O God, through your beloved son Jesus Christ', followed by a series of seven relative clauses, joined on by 'who', 'whom' etc, detailing the different facts of Christ's life and building up to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. This constitutes the whole of the eucharistic prayer except for the final paragraph (to which we will return). In the modern EPs this thanks and praise is directed more to the holiness of God. Each begins afresh after the dialogue of the preface with a massive assertion, the triple 'Sanctus', recalling the scene in Isaiah 6, where the prophet is knocked backwards by the vision of God and the flaming seraphim in the Temple. It forms the first acclamation by the people, and should be massively roared out by a full church. In each EP this is followed by praise of God's holiness (e.g. 'You are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise'), as the opening bracket of the prayer. Each EP ends, climaxes with the final bracket, the great final elevation of the Sacrament and 'all honour and glory is yours', to which the people signify the agreement by a massive 'Amen'.

The Eucharist is, then, a prayer of thanks and praise to God for God's holiness, for creation and for redemption. It also celebrates the unity of Christians and prays for its intensification.

The Roman Canon

From the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century (the Catholic answer to Luther's protests) till Vatican II in 1962-5 the standard eucharistic prayer was what is now known as the Roman Canon. This Canon is, of course, far older than Trent, and first appears in St Ambrose of Milan. It was probably part of the reform initiated by Pope Damasus. Christianity and its texts first came to the West in Greek, one of the languages commonly spoken in Rome. Although the official language was Latin, most cultured people spoke Greek, for there was a huge population of slaves from Greek-speaking countries, who formed much of the educating class, teachers, nannies, doctors (Julius Caesar's dying words were not 'Et tu, Brute' but και συ τεκνον). Damasus also instructed St Jerome to translate the Greek Bible into Latin. Paul wrote to the Roman Church in Greek, and the names he mentions in Roman 16 are overwhelmingly Greek! I wish to mention especially two features, symmetry and language.

The prayer is built symmetrically around the narrative of the Last Supper, the familiar formula which comes almost unchanged in every eucharistic prayer, the double consecration (The day before he suffered he took bread…, and When supper was ended he took the cup). This is the narrative part, the story part, called the

memory, commemoration or *anamnesis*. In the EP1 the account is slightly more dramatic, or more visual, 'looking up to heaven' and 'into his holy and venerable hands'. Before and after this come two *epicleseis*, or invocations of the Spirit, the first being a prayer asking that the offering may be acceptable and may become for us the body and blood of Christ. (Unusually for an epiclesis the word of 'Spirit' does not actually come in this prayer). After the consecration comes a second epiclesis asking God to accept these offerings as he accepted the offerings of Abel, Abraham and Melchisedek. This is the relic of a record of the Jewish historical process which features in the prayer of the Passover festival; it is an important feature, bringing to mind the whole history of salvation.

Outside these two prayers we come to the level of the living Church, the prayers first for the living and second for the dead, each being crowned by a list of Roman saints for company, the Church which has gone before. Here again we link to the real history of the Church, though, not surprisingly for a Roman prayer, confining it to Roman saints (though the apostles come first, and the women have to wait until the second list)

I find this balanced structure a-b-c-b'-a' very satisfying. Another unmistakable feature of EP I is the rotund and pleonastic repetitions, expressive of a gentle and profound reverence: help + protection, bless + approve, thanks + praise. God of glory + majesty, holy + perfect sacrifice, mercy + love, life + goodness, bless the gifts+ make them holy; this contributes a formality and dignity. In the pre-Vatican II version there were more: his holy and venerable hands; haec dona + haec munera + haec sancta sacrificia illibata, each with slightly increasing weight.

The most important change to this ancient prayer introduced by the Council was the acclamation after the consecration. There was already an acclamation by the people in the form of the Sanctus; this sets the tone of the prayer, taking us, so to speak, in heaven where the angels (*seraphim*, according to Isaiah 6) are praising God ceaselessly. This is very ancient, though not in the Canon of Hippolytus, which runs straight on from the dialogue of priest and people into the eucharistic prayer proper. It is, however, in line with the whole opening-out of Vatican II that the Mass should not be of the priest alone, but that the people should acclaim the Lord immediately after the consecration. These acclamations replace the constant 'Amen' which occurred several times at the end of parts of the Roman Canon, and has now been removed. 'Amen' is, of course the Hebrew word for acceptance of a prayer or formula, particularly an oath-formula, meaning 'I accept' or 'Yes, I agree'. The repeated acclamation is a Greek feature, an instance of the Roman Church learning from the Greek, Eastern tradition of Christianity.

> How are the acclamations engineered? Formerly the phrase 'the mystery of faith' was part of the consecration-prayer said by the priest. It was removed from there, as not being part of Jesus' own words at the Supper, and put later, though still in the celebrant's mouth. To this the people respond with one of four formulae drawn from the Pauline epistles, four ways in which Paul describes the saving work of Christ. For instance, acclamation number three draws on 1 Corinthians 11.26, 'As often as you eat this bread you are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.'

Another advantage of this Roman Canon is that it has some special slight variants for special feast days like Christmas and Corpus Christi. I would perhaps use this Roman Canon , with all its pomp, on a special occasion to emphasize the unity of the Church centred on Rome, its historical role and the apostolic authority.

The Hippolytus Canon

The second eucharistic prayer is the shortest. The Canon itself is reduced to the bare essentials, but much of the Hippolytus material is now included in the preface before the Sanctus. Almost all the striking phrases and pithy expressions which come in the preface are taken from Hippolytus, such phrases as 'we give you thanks through your beloved Son'…'through whom you created the universe'.. the Word you sent as Saviour to redeem us'…'born of the holy Spirit and the Virgin'…'he opened his arms on the cross'…'he revealed the resurrection'…'he fulfilled your will and won for you a holy people'. Some also come in the eucharistic prayer itself, such as 'we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you'. The final doxology is also basically from Hippolytus, 'that all your saints may praise and glorify you through your Son Jesus Christ'

The changes from Hippolytus are all the more striking for that.

1. The eucharistic prayer itself begins after the Sanctus with 'Lord you are holy indeed, the fount of all holiness'. It is obvious that the composers of the prayers felt that the eucharistic prayer should begin with praise of God, for almost the same phrase begins the third prayer also. This also agrees in principle with Hippolytus, for his eucharistic prayer is framed altogether as praise and thanks to God.
2. There are, as now in all the eucharistic prayers, two epicleseis, one before the words of institution (the anamnesis is regarded as the moment of consecration) for the coming of the Spirit on the elements to make them holy, and the second after the anamnesis for the effectiveness of the action: 'may we be brought together in unity by the holy Spirit'
3. The biggest change from Hippolytus is the introduction of the intercession for the Church and for the living and the dead. Perhaps these are the echo of awareness of the extent of the Church in time and space, brought in by the spread of the Church, of which the *Apostolic Tradition* in 225 AD was not yet so aware.
4. A delightful little touch is the 'dew-fall' of the Spirit. It is made more prominent by the translation: 'like the dew' would never do (especially in the USA). Dew is, of course, especially important in the Holy Land, where rain does not fall for most of the year. It is also much gentler than rainfall, so a lovely allusion to the gentle touch of the divine Spirit. It is obviously an allusion to Hosea 14.5

    > I shall be like the dew on Israel; he will bloom like a lily, and thrust out roots like the cedar of Lebanon. He will put out new shoots, he will have the beauty of the olive-tree and the fragrance of Lebanon.

5. Another fine touch is that we have been counted worth to stand in God's presence and serve him – to stand, not to kneel. The normal position of a servant is less dignified than this, but we are reminded that the stance of a Christian servant is upright, as members of the body of Christ.

This prayer is, I think, my favourite for ordinary usage. It leaves the structure so clear and basic:

Preface: the saving power of the Trinity

Acclamation: the Sanctus

Praise of God's holiness

Prayer to the Spirit to come on the gifts

Anamnesis of the Last Supper

Acclamation: Christ has Died,

Prayer to the Spirit for effectiveness of the Eucharist

Intercession for individuals, living and dead

Final Doxology: Praise to the Father through the Son in the Spirit

Agreement: Amen

The Third Prayer: the Antiochene Tradition

It is clear that this prayer has been carefully composed by a theologian – mostly the Benedictine Cypriano Vaggagini. It begins with praise of God's holiness. This comes in each of the new Eps, but is most explicit here, including each person of the Trinity. It makes a neat bracket with the final doxology, in which 'all glory and honour is yours', stressing that the whole prayer is for the honour and glory of the holy God.

> What does holiness mean? For me it is encapsulated in two Old Testament passages, Isaiah's vision of the glory of God in the Temple (Is 6) and in humans all the Israelites stand, silent, at the doors of their tents as Moses passes on his way to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp (too holy to be messed by ordinary life).

This prayer is also enriched by a lovely little quotation from Malachi 1.11, 'from the rising of the sun to its setting (this translation recently corrected from the earlier 'from east to west') my name is great among the nations and a pure gift is offered to my name'. This increased awareness of the worldwide nature of the Church is echoed also in the conclusion, 'your children, wherever they may be' (an allusion to Jn 11.52, 'wherever they may have been scattered') and by several other little touches in the EP which feed into the universality of salvation - a very Vatican II emphasis – all are members of 'your pilgrim Church on earth'.

The universality of time is also touched upon, 'from age to age you gather a people to yourself'. The whole emphasis of the prayer, which makes it so peaceful and inspiring, is being taken up to heaven, 'having left the world in your friendship', to join the glory of the Father.

Such a breadth of vision is characteristic of EP III. It follows the course of the new EPs as outlined in EPII, which in its brevity is the sort of model for the others. Both in this introduction and in the prayer after the anamnesis the emphasis is eschatological, in that the concentration is on the final salvation of all.

It is rightly suggested that this EP III should be the normal choice for a Sunday parish Mass. Not only is it right for length, neither the longest nor the shortest, but it also focuses on the ultimate salvation of the community of believers.

The Fourth Prayer

The fourth and final EP is the longest and both the most rhetorical and the most poetic of the prayers. These may be reasons why it is so rarely used. The chief feature of it is that it has its own preface, which must always be used with it. This is because there is one grand sweep through God's creative and redeeming work recorded in scripture and here relayed in scriptural terms. It begins, as do the other EPs, with praise of the holiness of God. The part before the Sanctus praises God for his heavenly creation, concentrating especially on the creation of light and of the heavenly court, the angels. After the Sanctus we come down to God's guiding hand in the history of Israel, and – in much greater detail than the other EPs – the New Testament and gospel accounts. There is a series of great statements, beginning, 'To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners freedom and to those in sorrow joy.' In this there are two special centres of interest, the dignity of God's human creation and the constant help of the Spirit, guiding the Church to salvation.

Conclusion

The Mass is the central expression of Christian faith, the Christian response to God's plan of salvation. It is not a prayer knocked up any-old-how, but it evolved over many centuries, drawing more and more richness into its expression, We should pray it in the awareness that it is the fruit of a long and devoted history of prayer and dedication.

The Pattern of the Eucharistic Prayer

Preface: the saving power of the Trinity

Acclamation: the Sanctus

Praise of God's holiness

Prayer to the Spirit to come on the gifts

Anamnesis of the Last Supper

Acclamation: Christ has Died,

Prayer to the Spirit for effectiveness of the Eucharist

Intercession for individuals, living and dead

Final Doxology: Praise to the Father through the Son in the Spirit

Agreement: Amen