

THE  
MASS  
IN  
CLOSE-UP  
*a comprehensive exposition*

*Antony Jones Ph.L, STL*

**Introduction**

I suppose I was about eight when I started going to daily Mass. I was an altar server and very proud to be part of the team. I studied Latin in secondary school, so before long the unchanging parts of the Mass were very familiar to me, with much of it known by heart. I studied for the Priesthood at Rome and was ordained in 1966. Apart from a five year spell in the Catholic Missionary Society, I have ministered in my native Wales. As I recently celebrated my seventieth

birthday, it struck me that I have been attending or celebrating daily Mass for sixty-odd years.

This brought home to me two things. First that for more than sixty years I have been reciting the same prayers day after day, sometimes several times a day, without tiring, without staleness. This fact must seem almost unbelievable, but I share it with most priests. In fact, far from becoming stale with constant repetition, the Mass continues daily to disclose further and deeper insights into its enthralling mystery.

Secondly, that it has been my most stable and faithful companion throughout my life. My parents who introduced me to the Mass and taught me to love it are long since dead; friends have come and gone; I have lived in many different places and countries, in widely differing circumstances, but no matter where I was or whatever kind of situation I found myself in, the Mass has remained my faithful friend. It is the one thing in my life that has not changed.

Oh yes it has changed superficially. It changed from Latin to the rather hurried translation I have lived with most of my priestly life. It has changed again in this latest 2011 revision. But the Mass itself has never changed. In whatever language or translation, the Mass has always been the Mass, the sacrament whose

depth of mystery has always fascinated me and drawn me on.

The original idea behind this book was to explain to my parishioners the most recent changes in translation; but as it progressed, it turned into a kind of guidebook in which I try to share with my readers the depth of the Mass as I see it and pray it. I hope it will help you.

### **Note to the revised version of 2016**

On re-reading this book with a view to revising it, it became abundantly clear to me that it is very condensed, stuffed to overflowing with liturgical facts and theological ideas. It put me in mind of an American lady who joined me at supper one evening during my one and only visit to the Holy Land. While I had been approaching my sight-seeing in a leisurely manner, she had been whisked around at lightning speed by some guide or other. She had seen everything. But her question to me was: had she been to the Mount of Transfiguration? Mount Tabor of all places! She had seen so much in such a short time that she didn't know what she had seen and what she hadn't - not even a mountain!

It could be the same with your tour of the Mass in this short book. I would advise you not to read more than one chapter at a time; even, maybe, only one subsection at a time. Take a new idea or two with you each time you go to Mass and let your understanding of this great Sacrament mature and progress slowly and deeply. In the Holy Land I made a point of spending an hour in silent prayer at each of the most sacred sites. It's these places that I remember, not the rest. So let it be with you, in this your guided tour of the Mass.

**October 2022.** A further update. As St David says:  
*Take care of the little things!*

*This book is dedicated to the memory of the late  
Beth Kennelly  
with gratitude for her consistent and enthusiastic  
support.*

## **1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE MASS**

To understand the Mass properly, we have to understand its structure and how it got that structure.

First there was the Last Supper, at which Our Lord took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying: *Take this and eat it, for this is my body.* When supper was ended he took the cup, and said, *This is the cup of my blood.* This was the first Mass. Then He said, *You must do this as a Memorial of me.*

So the Apostles and disciples did this in their homes: they said Jesus' words over the bread and wine; then they broke the Bread and distributed it and the Chalice among themselves. They called this earliest form of the Mass *The Breaking of the Bread.* Today we would call it the *Liturgy of the Eucharist.*

*The Liturgy of the Word* (the Readings) still had to be formed, and this is how that came about and how it came to precede the Breaking of the Bread:

In those earliest days, the Christians were still going to the Jewish Synagogue for the readings of the Scriptures, the singing of the Psalms, and a weekly sermon.

With anti-Christian feeling building, they were very soon banned from the Synagogue. Not to be outdone, they took the essence of the synagogue service back home with them and used it as preparation for their

Mass. Before they consecrated the bread and wine, they read from the Old Testament Scriptures and sang the Psalms, just as they had done at Synagogue.

Then St Paul started writing his letters to the Churches. These were soon being read at these gatherings. The Mass now consisted of: Reading from the Old Testament and the singing of a Psalm (the Synagogue service) followed by a reading from one of St Paul's letters, followed by the Breaking of the Bread.

Paul's Letter (if one was being read) was usually followed by an eyewitness account of something Jesus had said or done. One of the Apostles would stand up and recall the event. But as the years passed and those contemporary witnesses of Jesus died out, there was no one left to remember what Jesus had said and done. But by this time, the Gospels had been written. So instead of an eye-witness account, they read from one of the Gospels. The Bishop or Priest would then comment on the Gospel, thus adding the *Homily* to the Mass. The Breaking of the Bread gave final shape to the service. So the Mass, as we know it today was quickly formed.

# PART ONE

# INTRODUCTORY

# RITEs

## 2. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The earliest sign of the Cross used in the Church was made with the thumb on the forehead. This form has survived down the centuries in the Liturgy and we find it to this day it in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick, as well as in the ceremonials of Ash Wednesday.

### **The Sign of the Cross and Baptism**

We were baptised in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, exactly the same words we use in the Sign of the Cross. At our Baptism the Sign of the Cross was put on our foreheads as a kind of indelible label denoting what we are and who we are,

a kind of brand mark identifying us as children of God and sheep of Christ's flock; and all our subsequent use of this Sign takes us back to that moment of Baptism when we first became Christ's.

## **Baptism and the Eucharist**

The Sign of the Cross at the very beginning of the Mass, with the very same words with which we were baptised, links immediately the two great Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

This is an essential connection. The moment of Baptism is the moment when the Risen Christ gives us the fruits of his Passion, restoring us to that original friendship with God destroyed by sin.

The Holy Spirit, the very Life of God, is poured into our hearts, transforming us from mere creatures into children of the Father. From then on we live with God's life as really as we live with the life given us by our human parents. And being children of the same Father we are brothers and sisters together, belonging, as St Paul reminds us, to *the household of God* (Ephesians 2:19). This is precisely what entitles us to share the family meal of the Eucharist.

St Paul also tells us that, baptised into Christ, we are mystically united to his Death and Resurrection: we die with Him and we rise with Him. Baptism *unites* us to his Death and Resurrection; the Mass *celebrates* his Death and Resurrection, as we shall presently see.

## **The Assembly**

So the sign of the Cross, reminding us of our Baptism, reminds us also that we all belong to the same Family of God. Our gathering together for Mass is, therefore, significant in itself: it is the assembling of God's household. Christ's presence in this assembly is one of the principle ways in which He is present in the Mass. The presence of Christ in each one of us forms us into the People of God, the Household of God, the Body of Christ, the Church. Christ's People, living among the unbelieving world but now gathered together for the Mass, are the Church in microcosm, the Universal Church in miniature, the Holy Catholic Church in the lowly parish church.

## **What we Profess by making the Sign of the Cross**

We make the Sign of the Cross so often that we can easily forget what we are professing when we make it. We confess, first of all, our belief in the Blessed Trinity, that the one true God is in fact three Persons

of equal power and majesty, who, though Three, are in essence One. This is the mystery which underpins the whole of our Faith; the mystery too big for the human mind to comprehend; the inner, revealed, nature of God. We believe it because it has been revealed to us by Christ.

The Sign of the Cross is as profound an act of faith in the one true God as it is humanly possible to make.

As we confess our belief in the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity, we trace the shape of Christ's Cross on our body. By doing this we profess our faith that God actually took a human body like ours and, *for us men and for our salvation*, as we say in the Creed, took a wooden Cross, carried it up Calvary Hill and died on it. We profess publicly our faith in this Crucified Christ whenever we make this Sign. *We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those whom God has called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor 1:23-24).

### 3. THE GREETING

The dictionary defines *greeting* as a polite word of welcome or recognition. Immediately after making the Sign of the Cross, the Priest greets the congregation; he welcomes them and recognises who they are. They are not just any old crowd of people: these are God's People, baptised into Christ, adopted children of God and alive with his very Spirit. The Priest recognises them for who they are and in reply the congregation acknowledges the Priest for who he is, the ordained minister whose endowment of the Spirit, received at his ordination, makes the Eucharist possible. Thus their reply to his greeting is: *And with your spirit*.

*And with your spirit* seems unnatural to our ears; we would not normally respond to someone's greeting in that way. But *Et cum spiritu tuo* (the exact Latin equivalent) would have sounded equally odd to the ears of those who spoke Latin as their mother tongue in those early days of the Church when this response was originally composed. *And also with you* would be more natural and what you would expect. But the inclusion of the unexpected and jarring word *spirit* in the response draws immediate attention to the fact that the person to whom it is addressed is possessed of an extraordinary Spirit, the Holy Spirit, received at ordination and necessary for the celebration of the Mass. The greeting therefore reminds us that this is

no ordinary encounter between a man and a group; the Mass is on a different plane.

## **Dialogue**

A greeting also implies the beginning of a dialogue; you don't greet yourself! The liturgical greeting at the beginning of Mass reminds us that we are about to engage in a dialogue, but a dialogue engaged in at several different levels.

### **Dialogue: Priest - People**

First there is the dialogue between Priest and People. That dialogue goes on throughout the Mass. This is the main reason why the altars were turned round in the 70s, following the directive of the Second Vatican Council, so that the priest and people could face one another; you don't normally speak to a person's back.

In the early Church, as so many of the ancient churches of Christendom bear witness, the altars faced the people then as they do now.

### **Dialogue: Church - God**

But there is a dialogue going on at a deeper level.

Apart from a couple of prayers before Holy Communion, every major prayer in the Mass is addressed to the Father. But every major prayer is addressed to the Father *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. The dialogue that is going on is not just between us and God but between the Church and God, the Church being ourselves in union with Christ. Jesus Christ, in all of us as High Priest through the Sacrament of Baptism, and in the Priest in a special way through the Sacrament of Orders, prays with us to his Father in the Mass. The dialogue is raised to an extraordinary plane.

### **Dialogue: Me - God**

In this sublime context, there is also a dialogue going on between our individual souls and God, the Spirit breathing where He will. This is the dialogue we are most aware of; on our part probably including matters as mundane as the baby's teething or where the next mortgage payment is coming from. Common and routine though these anxieties may be, they become absorbed at Mass into this great and timeless intercession of Christ with his Father and take on a status they could never otherwise claim.

## 4. THE PENITENTIAL RITE

### **The Holiness of God and the Sinfulness of Man**

Have you ever listened to Cardinal Newman's beautiful poem *The Dream of Gerontius* set to music by Sir Edward Elgar? It tells the story of Gerontius' journey from this life to the next, and builds up to the climactic moment when he sees God face to face, expressed by a dramatic lightening-flash of sound. That encounter is described better by Elgar's music than by Cardinal Newman's words, master wordsmith though Newman was; some things are beyond telling.

What first comes home to us at our celebration of the Mass is that we have entered into this presence of God, we, who are dust and ashes and sinful dust and ashes at that; and He, the Lord God, purer than the transparent heavens.

Instinctively we become aware of our sinfulness in this presence of the Holy One. This is why the Penitential Rite follows immediately on the Priest's greeting, at the very beginning of the celebration.

The forms of the Penitential Rite changed somewhat with the revised translation of 2011, but these changes need no explanation. What is most noticeable is, perhaps, the return of the *Confiteor* to something like its old format, with the striking of the breast three times and the accompanying words: *through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault*. This change has been made not only to conform the prayer to the original Latin, but also, I think, to bring home to us again the seriousness of offending Almighty God.

Because we have never seen God and because we cannot begin to imagine his infinite greatness, goodness and holiness as they really exist in Him, we can never really appreciate the seriousness of offending Him. Earlier generations could not appreciate this either; but we, in our generation, seem to have gone further, we seem to have lost sight of sin almost completely. This is the cause of so many of our personal, social and international woes, evident everywhere.

It was precisely because we are sinners, because the world had fallen away from God and in need of reconciliation that Christ came among us as a man and paid with his life the penalty of our own personal misdeeds. Christ's Incarnation, Death and

Resurrection, the entire *Christ-Event*, can only be understood in terms of the infinite love of God who yearned to reconcile wayward man to Himself through the forgiveness of sin. Such is the massive relevance of evil, and we cannot brush it under the carpet.

We as Christians must, therefore, take evil seriously in order to take God and his Christ seriously and recognise our accountability before Him. Whatever others may say or do, we must see ourselves as different, *as a people set apart*, as St Peter aptly reminds us. We must see ourselves as sinners seeking to be saints, always in need of forgiveness, reconciliation and ongoing purification. Hence the need of the Penitential Rite at the very beginning of Mass.

## **Penitential Rite not the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

But the Church has always insisted that this Penitential Rite is not the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confession is that unique Sacrament instituted by Christ on the evening of Resurrection Sunday, when he breathed the Holy Spirit into his Apostles and gave them the power to forgive sin in his name. Through this Sacrament Christ remains an abiding healing Presence in his Church. In this

capacity He meets our individuality and frailty with his love and reconciliation, and shares with us what He has won for us by the bitter pain of his Passion.

When you consider that Christ came among us principally to reconcile mankind to God, the neglect of the Sacrament of Penance is amazing. We Catholics, like everyone else, are deeply influenced by the trends of society. But will society's standards serve as an excuse when we, like Geronsius, appear before the judgment seat of God, that moment no words can describe? The regular Penitential Rite at Mass should remind us of the need for that special encounter with Christ, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which sends us away walking on air.

## 6. THE GLORIA

Does Pope Telesphorus mean anything to you? A holy hermit, born in southern Italy but of Greek origin, he became Pope and led the Church for eleven difficult years in the early part of the second century (128-139) before dying a martyr's death under the Emperor Hadrian. I introduce him to you because Pope Telesphorus established the practice of Christmas Midnight Mass at which, we are told, the *Gloria* was

sung. This puts the Gloria into the second century; yet it is even older than this, for it originated in the East and was probably known to Telesphorus when he was a youngster.

So this much loved hymn has been around almost as long as Christianity itself, and is used not only by ourselves, but also by the Orthodox Christians and many of the Protestant Churches. It has been set to music by most of the great composers and enjoyed many beautiful settings in the Church's original plainsong. The translation introduced to the English speaking world after the Second Vatican Council was an ugly and truncated version of the original. But since the 2011 revision, we now rejoice in a translation faithful to and worthy of the original.

It begins with the song of the Christmas angels, as recorded by St Luke: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will* (Lk 2:14). No wonder Pope Telesphorus used it at his Midnight Mass.

What the translators of the old version cut and what the new (2011) translation restores is the almost breathless praise that comes at the beginning of the hymn: *We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory. I*

use the word *breathless* because it is as if the person praying cannot find words quickly enough or appropriate enough to express adequately what he wants to say.

This in itself is very significant: we cannot ever praise God as he deserves; nor can we ever adequately express it; not the Gloria, not any one of us; only Christ.

Here, in the Eucharist, we give God *all honour and glory* because, and only because, we are latching on to Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father. He alone, by making his Sacrifice on the Cross a living reality in the Eucharist (as we shall see), gives us the opportunity (incredible though it may seem) of giving infinite and therefore adequate praise to the Infinite and Almighty God.

The Gloria, written as it was in the second century, is a triumphant hymn of praise to the Blessed Trinity, putting emphasis on the fact that Jesus is God and on the equality He enjoys with the Father. In those days the Church was struggling against the heresy called *Gnosticism*, a weird heresy drawing bits and pieces together from different religions, and therefore coming up with some very strange explanations as to who Jesus really was. The Gloria, as well as being a

majestic hymn of praise, is a profession of faith in Jesus, the Father's Only Begotten Son and the God-Man who takes away the sins of the world.

So let the Gloria express our unshakable faith in Jesus and be a breathless effort to praise God as fully as we humanly can, leaving Christ to lift our prayer onto an infinite plane.

## 7. THE COLLECT

When you visit friends, first of all you greet them, tell them that you are sorry for not having sent them a Christmas card or visited them for ages, then you tell them how well they are looking and how much you admire the new velvet curtains. Then, when all these niceties are over, you get down to the real business of your visit: you need a helping hand with the baby-sitting or want to borrow a cup of sugar.

It's a bit, just a bit, like that when we come to Mass. We *greet* the good Lord first of all; then at the *Penitential Rite* we tell him how sorry we are for neglecting Him a bit, for not having been more attentive to what he expects of us; then we praise him in the *Gloria* for his wonderful world and more

wonderful Self; and then, finally, get around to telling him what we really want, in the *Collect*.

The first prayer of petition, asking, comes in what we know as the *Opening Prayer* or the *Collect*. Though there are petitions embedded in the Eucharist Prayer, the main thrust of the Mass is not asking, but praising and *thanking* (the very meaning of the word *Eucharist*). It is a more noble form of prayer to praise God for his greatness and to thank Him for his kindness than to ask him for the things we need or think we need.

We should always remember this, making sure that our daily prayers are not all asking. But we should not go overboard like some Christians do, who say they ask nothing of God but simply trust Him to supply all their needs. This is wonderful when it is true, but it can be a smokescreen for not really believing in the power of prayer. Humble petition is good for the soul. It makes us recognise that we are not sufficient of ourselves, that we need God and must always approach Him as a child his parent. It keeps us humble; keeps our feet firmly on the ground; and expresses our real faith in our provident God.

The Latin Collects, with the wisdom of the ages behind them, were masterpieces of poetry and prose,

expressing beautifully our deepest human needs and aspirations. The translation we have moved away from literally butchered them; and if there was any part of the Mass that needed re-translation it was the Collects. The version we are now using (2011) is an improvement and translates exactly the meaning of the original, but lacks almost entirely the poetry and balance of the ancient Latin. This is really disappointing: formal prayer requires a degree of poetry. When something is intended to be said over and over again, it needs to be beautiful.

The Collect is the first part of the Mass which we call *proper*, proper because it belongs to this Mass and not to any other. The parts of the Mass which are always the same are called *common*. So we have the *Proper* and the *Common* of the Mass. The Collect is proper because it changes with the day, the season, the feast. It sums up the general theme of the Mass.

It is called the *Collect* because it collects together the prayers of the congregation. The Priest introduces it by saying *Let us pray*. There follows a pause which, in fact, is the really important bit. It is the moment of silence when we formulate in our minds our own personal petitions, before the priest *collects* all the prayers, hopes and fears in the hearts and minds of the congregation and offers them to God.

The Collect always ends *Through our Lord Jesus Christ....*This reminds us again of the all important fact that our prayers cannot reach Almighty God unless they are borne there by Jesus Christ who is *the only Mediator between God and Man (1 Tim 2:5)*. All our prayers and good works go to God through Him, and also through Him comes down upon us God's every blessing. He is a two way street to heaven. And going to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, our petitions are "turbocharged" by his almighty influence.

## 8. BODY LANGUAGE

When the Priest has said the Collect, we all sit down. Why? And why were we standing up in the first place?

We communicate not only by the written or spoken word, we express ourselves also by body language. When we smile, frown, stand, sit or kneel we are making a statement.

### **Kneeling**

Getting down on our knees usually means that we are about to scrub the floor or do something else that necessitates our being in close contact with the ground. The Latin for ground is *humus*, from which we get the word *humility*. Being on our knees is a sign of humility, a sign that we recognise the presence of something or someone greater than ourselves. This is why we go down on our knees at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer when the miracle of transubstantiation is about to take place and bread and wine to become the real presence of God. But when it comes to the history of the Mass, kneeling is a very recent innovation.

## **Prostration**

The awareness of the divine presence which sends us to our knees would have put the ancient Jews flat on their faces. This is how it would have been with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This ancient posture of adoration has been preserved in the Church's liturgy in only three places: when the deacon (before his ordination to the priesthood) and the bishop elect (before his ordination to the episcopacy) lie flat on their face before the altar; and when the priest prostrates himself before the stripped altar on Good Friday.

## **Sitting**

When the Collect has been said, we sit down to listen to the Word of God. At that moment, the first major part of the Mass begins, the *Liturgy of the Word*.

Being seated is our normal posture when we are on the receiving end of something, when we are taking something in. We sit to read, watch television, attend a lecture, have a meal. We sit down and make ourselves comfortable to concentrate more easily on what we are receiving. We sit at this point in the Mass to take in what God is about to say to us, speaking through his sacred Word. Sitting is body language for being in receptive mode.

## **Standing**

So, why do we stand for the Gospel? “Out of respect”, I hear you answer. Yes, but not entirely. Our standing here is body language also expressing our faith that Jesus, who now speaks to us through his Gospel, stood up out of death. Christ now stands among us as our Risen Lord.

Standing was the normal posture for prayer among the Jews and this ancient habit has survived in the Mass. You notice that, apart from during the first two readings, the Priest stands throughout the entire Mass.

He stands, most of the time, with arms outstretched to heaven.

This is exactly the way the Jews and early Christians used to pray, exactly the way Our Lord would have prayed to his Father, standing with arms extended to heaven. Here is St Paul instructing his successor Timothy: *“I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing”* (Tim 2:8). In many parts of the Church this gesture is coming back among the faithful, and it is good to see it among some of our own congregations.

In the Roman Catacombs, where the walls are often illustrated with biblical scenes, the figure of the *Orans*, the praying man with uplifted arms, appears everywhere. The practice of joining our hands for prayer is of relatively recent origin.

Talking of Rome, if you go to any of the great basilicas, you will find that the nave is completely empty of pews, like a great dance-hall. This is because the ancient and normal way of attending Mass was to stand throughout. Around the walls, and often built into the walls, there are/were benches where people, feeling the strain of too much standing, could quietly retreat. This is the origin of our English phrase *to go to the wall*.

Because standing was the normal posture for prayer, we still stand for a considerable portion of the Mass; and we immediately get up from our seats whenever the Priest invites us to pray. It was the way the Jews prayed, but for us Christians it has taken on that further significance of being body-language for faith in the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

## **PART TWO**

# **THE LITURGY OF THE WORD**

## 9. THE WORD OF THE LORD

So, after the Collect, we all sit down to listen to what the Lord is about to say to us through the Scriptures. With the introduction of the 2011 revised translation, there was little change to the Liturgy of the Word.

However, instead of saying, *This is the Word of the Lord*, the Reader now simply says *The Word of the Lord*. Not much of a change, but it does have its significance.

Try saying to yourself *The Word of the Lord*. Say it twice: the first time with your voice dropping a tone then with your voice rising a tone on the word *Lord*. You will notice that the first time you are making a statement; the second time you are asking a question. This is probably part of the reason why this change has been made.

The Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord? The same is true of the words used at Holy Communion: The Body of Christ. The Body of Christ?

The Reader is making a statement: *This is the Word of the Lord*. He is asserting that what you have just listened to is not his word but the Lord's word. He is saying in effect that God Himself has just spoken to you.

He is also asking a question: *the Word of the Lord?* Do you really believe that what I have just spoken and what you have just listened to is really the Word of the Lord; that God Himself has just addressed you personally?

The change in translation has made the phrase *The Word of the Lord* both a statement of fact and a challenge to faith.

But what are the grounds for asserting that these words are indeed the Words of the Lord? Our next chapter attempts to answer this tricky question.

## 10. INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The Jews believed that their Sacred Scriptures were *inspired* by God.

Inspiration, of course, comes from the Latin word *inspirare* (*spirare* - to breathe) which originally referred to the gods *breathing something into* someone. For this reason, inspiration was a religious word from the start. Still to this day we retain something of that original meaning: the London Olympics of 2012 and the Rio Olympics of 2016 were intended to *inspire* a generation.

By declaring their Scriptures inspired, the Jews, conscious of being God's Chosen and Beloved People, claimed that God had somehow breathed his truth into these writings, making them sacred and holy and different from all other forms of literature; that when they were read, God Himself spoke through them.

The Early Church inherited and accepted these Jewish writings for what the Jewish People themselves believed them to be. In accepting them, she put her seal of authenticity upon them, remembering Christ's words that *the Holy Spirit would lead his Church into all truth* (Jn. 16:13). Believing herself to be God's *New Chosen People*, the People of the *new and eternal covenant*, she called these Jewish Scriptures the *Old Covenant*, or the *Old Testament*.

As a child inherits from parents, so the Church saw herself inheriting these Jewish Scriptures from the Jewish People. She accepted all those writings they themselves regarded as their Inspired Scriptures: that sacred account of God's dealings with his Chosen People, the first part of His revelation of Himself to mankind.

And having taken these Scriptures to herself, she saw in them, in the light of Christ's life, death and resurrection, the wonderful preparation that God had laid since the foundation of the world for the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. What was and still is precious to the Jews became equally precious to the Christians.

## **The New Testament**

When the Son of God, which the Scriptures had foretold in such detail, did eventually come in the Person of Jesus Christ, He made such an impact that many of his contemporaries took it upon themselves to write accounts of what had happened.

Many versions of Jesus' life and teaching circulated in those very early days, as well as many letters and other writings, passing from one local Christian congregation to the next. You can imagine the

excitement! But only the Church, with her special charisma of infallibility (as we shall discuss later) could decide which of these various writings were authentically inspired by God and which were not.

Of the many accounts of Jesus' life, she chose but four, the Gospels we are familiar with to this day. The others she rejected, letting them become obsolete.

Including the Gospels, the writings she accepted were the Acts of the Apostles, the apostolic Letters and the Apocalypse. Calling these writings the *New Testament* (the Scriptures of the *New People of God*), she added them to the Jewish Scriptures, and gave the world what we know today as the *Bible*.

## **The Workings of Inspiration**

To say that the Scriptures are inspired is to affirm that God has breathed into these writings his Spirit of Truth. But this assertion raises many questions and problems. How could God inspire someone to write exactly what He wanted, without making the human author a mere puppet or robot, controlled in every way by the will of God? Did the human authors of these Scriptures, therefore, lose their freedom while God took over their minds? Or did God dictate his very

own words, as the Muslims believe of their Koran, making the writer no more than a scribe?

God, we know, respects our human freedom and our human nature too much to subject them to any treatment which would demean them. Not even to provide us with his Word would God ever deprive us of our essential freedom by taking over our mind and treating us as a mere automated robot.

Nor did He choose to dictate his Word to us. This is obvious from the fact that each book of the Bible reveals the human qualities of its author. You can detect and recognise, for example, the education and sophistication behind the Gospel of St John and the writings of St Paul; equally, the lack of refinement and want of elegance in the Gospel of St Mark. Their human literary and intellectual talents, or lack of them, are on display for all to see. John wrote as John; Paul as Paul; Mark as Mark; and the same with all the sacred authors of the Old and New Testaments. It is supremely evident that they had neither been dictated to by God nor controlled by Him. They were writing as freely as I am writing this.

So what exactly was God doing? To speak of a divinely inspired author is to speak of a person who is so in tune with God's Mind that what he wants to

write is exactly what God wants him to write. Mark writes freely exactly what he wants to write, using all his own mental powers and talents, but because he is so attuned to the mind of God under inspiration he writes only what God would write. Like two violins playing the same note; each sound is created by the skill of the player, each is individual and independent, but both are totally attuned to each other, producing a single sound. God's Mind and the human mind, God's Word and the human word coincide and concur, making inspiration something totally beyond the normal laws of nature.

So the Church reached the all important conclusion that each book of the Bible has two genuine authors at the same time, one divine and one human. God is the real Author of Mark's Gospel but equally so is Mark. God is the real Author of Jeremiah's prophecies, but equally so is Jeremiah. And so with the history books of the Old Testament, the Wisdom Books, the Psalms; so also with the Letters of St Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, the Apocalypse of St John, and every other book in both Old and New Testaments of the Bible. This has huge implications for our whole approach to the Sacred Scriptures and especially to the way we use them in prayer.

## 11. SCRIPTURE AS PRAYER

As we have just established in the last chapter, the inspired Scriptures are in a category of their own. Uniquely they have God, as well as some human person, as their Author - it is the living God Himself, therefore, who speaks to us when they are read. As a result they are the perfect means for converting our prayer from a *monologue*, where we do all the talking, into a *dialogue* where we engage with God in live conversation. We not only speak to Him but we actually listen to Him too, and when we listen to God's Word something remarkable happens. This is prayer at a very elevated level. It happens at Mass and it happens when we are praying the Scriptures at home.

### **Listening**

As we said in an earlier chapter, the Mass is essentially a many-faceted dialogue between us and God, taking place both in the Liturgy of the Eucharist and, more obviously, in the Liturgy of the Word.

It's very easy to say that God speaks to us, but it's very hard to get that fact into our heads - that God, the almighty Creator and Redeemer, actually

communicates with us and listens to our reply!  
Hearing and listening are two very distinct operations: the former carried out by our physical ears and brains, the latter by our mind and spirit. We can hear the one o'clock news while we are chatting with the family - our ears are working as they should. But if our mind is not on it, if we are not listening, then the news becomes just a background noise, hardly different from the din of the builders just outside the window. But if we are listening then we not only hear with our ears but also absorb and assimilate the words with our mind and heart.

## **The Prologue to St John's Gospel**

The use of the title *Word of God* for Christ is very familiar to us all. It was an insight of St John the Evangelist who first expounds it in the opening verse of his Gospel. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" (John 1:1). St John is teaching us that it is Christ who is this Divine Word of the Father, it is Christ who speaks to us through the sacred Scriptures.

As a speaker implants his word in the mind of his hearer, so the divine Speaker plants his Word in us whenever we engage prayerfully with the Sacred Scriptures. Christ, the Sower, sows his seed deep in

our hearts, and he explains the simile: *This is the meaning of the parable: the seed is the word of God.*” (Luke 8:11). The reading of the Scriptures and listening to them with an obedient and docile heart is therefore almost sacramental, for the purpose of all seven Sacraments is to plant Christ in our deepest self and to nurture his growth - his in us and ours in Him.

The first chapter of St John’s Gospel, which introduces and develops this theme of Christ as the Word of God has become known simply as the *Prologue*. It is such a theological and spiritual masterpiece that it became attached to the end of every single Mass for centuries, a custom that began in England long before the Reformation and spread over time across the entire Church. It was known as *the last Gospel* and only removed from the *Common* of the Mass when the Liturgy was reformed after the Second Vatican Council.

## **Listening with difficulty**

Listening attentively to the Word of God in the Mass readings shows due and proper respect to the Divine Speaker while at the same time opening ourselves to what is supremely to our benefit.

Of course, if the public address system in church isn't up to much or the reader hasn't been properly trained, then we can't listen properly because we can't hear properly. In those circumstances, or if deafness is our problem, a case could be made out for using a hand missal, but this is very far from the ideal. We should let God speak directly to us; the printed page is an unnecessary go-between that just gets in the way. Instead of listening we are reading. With head buried in a missal, or even worse still a missalette, we are, to an extent, isolating ourselves from the worshipping community of which we are an integral part. In addition, we deprive ourselves of benefitting from all the rich imagery and visual beauty of the actual celebration, profound and powerful symbolism capable of speaking to and shaping our deepest selves. We are meant to be immersed in the liturgical celebration in its totality, deeply aware of *being no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household*, (Ephesians 2:19). Aware of the Eucharist as it unfolds its mystery before our eyes, rich in colour, gesture and symbolism. Aware, above all, of the presence of Christ in the Assembly, in his Word and in the Sacrament. Nothing should get in the way of this.

### **Putting the hand missal to good use**

But where a hand missal really does come into its own is at home. There we can use it for reflecting back on the Sunday Scriptures in the light of the homily we listened to. Or/and we can use it for priming ourselves for next Sunday's Scriptures. It can also be a very useful tool for praying the Sunday Scriptures at home and keeping ourselves in tune with the mind and mood of the Church, as she moves from season to season, from fast to feast.

Every Sunday Mass has a scriptural theme which is determined by the Gospel. The first reading, which almost always comes from the Old Testament, has been chosen by the Church to tie up with the Gospel: it throws light on the Gospel, and, in its turn, is itself illuminated by the Gospel. These two readings give us the theme of the Mass and present us with a copious weekly supply of food for thought and prayerful dialogue with the Lord. As we journey through our week, let the Lord open up the Scriptures to us as He did to the two disciples as they journeyed to Emmaus: *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself* (Luke 24:27).

When you are praying these readings at home (*lectio divina*) do not read as you would a book or newspaper; go slowly, very slowly, from phrase to

phrase. Stay with any word or phrase which seems especially to be addressing itself to you; rest in it; return to it; remember it. Christ is speaking to your heart. Allow Him the space to speak to you in just the way He wants to. Let every word or phrase of the reading stream and percolate through your mind. Let the Word of God seep into your soul as you repeat the word or phrase over and over again until, like the transformation of the water in the coffee percolator, your mind transforms into the mind of Christ. Thus the Word of God, literally, *changes your mind*, which is precisely what it is intended to do.

## 12. THE FIRST READING

Most often the First Reading at Sunday Mass comes from the Old Testament. Unless it is preceded by some kind of explanation, this reading comes to us like a bolt from the blue, hitting us unexpectedly between eyes.

Suddenly, wrenched from our gentle Sunday morning routine, we are plunged into an obscure episode in the

life of one of the ancient Kings of Israel or find ourselves being reprimanded by an equally ancient and usually angry Old Testament Prophet. From his chair, the priest sees a glazed expression descend upon the faces of his congregation. These readings really do need some prior explanation to ensure they make the sense they are meant to make on the 21st Century mind.

But anyway why bother with the Old Testament at all? Christ has come. That is enough!

The Old Testament prepared Christ's way for the Jews; the Old Testament is still preparing his way for us. Yes, Christ has come. But, as the season of Advent annually reminds us, He still comes, He unceasingly comes. *At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"* (Mt. 25:6).

God prepared the way for the coming of his Son by choosing a People for Himself and taking great care in their instruction. It was important that when the Son of God made his appearance in this world there would be at least some people able to understand what he was talking about.

The pagan world was utterly corrupt, having no moral sense whatsoever. Before the Messiah could begin to

explain the finer points of religion, it was necessary for the people to have some fundamental understanding of who God really is and a basic appreciation of the difference between right and wrong. You can't teach quantum physics to someone who can't add two and two together. So out of this pagan world God called Abraham, made him the father of a nation, and proceeded by word and deed to teach this People, the Jews, about Himself.

Over the course of about two thousand years He instructed them - by his deeds as much as by his words. He saved them from Egypt; they learned He was a Saviour God. He gave them the Law; they learned He was a moral God. He led them safely through the wilderness, giving them bread from heaven and water from the rock; they learned He was a provident Father. He sent them prophets who spoke his words to them and taught them morality. Just like sending our children to school and knowing it will take a long time before all lessons can be learned, so God sent his People to school and their schooling took two thousand years. And this period, this schooling, is what we call the *Old Testament*.

## 13. REVELATION

How could anyone on his own understand the ways of God unless God were to tell him? How could we know that He is a Father, a just and righteous Father, a loving Father, unless he revealed it to us? And this is precisely what happened. In deed and word, God patiently told the Jewish People about Himself and explained Himself. This is what theologians call *Revelation*, a word that is essential to our proper understanding of our Faith.

The process of Revelation was gradual, from the call of Abraham, through the lifetime of Christ to the death of St John, the last of the Apostles. Christ, of course, is the very culmination of Revelation, being Himself the very personification of it. Christ Himself *is* Revelation. All we know about God has been told us, revealed to us, by God Himself, through Christ. Christianity is therefore a *revealed religion*, as, of course, is Judaism.

Through Islam's acceptance of the Old Testament and certain aspects of Christianity, together with the alleged revelations to the Prophet Mohammad, it also claims to be a revealed religion. Most other world

faiths, however, do not claim to have been directly revealed by God and accept that they have evolved through natural human reasoning springing from our instinctive awareness that there is indeed some Supreme Being on which everything depends.

Christian Revelation was not *completed* during the two thousand years of Jewish history. That was a time of preparation, a time of schooling (like primary and secondary school leading up to university). The university time, as it were, was when Christ eventually came, who said to the eager crowds listening to his Sermon on the Mount, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*” (Mt.5:17) - like a university lecturer building on all the students’ previous schooling. In other words, the Lord’s teaching was to bring to completion the groundwork the Holy Spirit had already laid throughout the long years of that special Jewish history. The period from Abraham to the present day is referred to by theologians as *Salvation History*.

When Christ came He brought revelation to its completion. He taught us all we need to know about God, as only He could, *because he had come from God and was returning to God* (John 13:3). How could the human mind, for example, ever reach the

knowledge that there is only one God, and that this one God exists in a Trinity of Persons, unless Christ, who is Himself of God, had told us so?

As a result of this prolonged period of training, the Jews, at the time of Jesus, stood head and shoulders above all other peoples when it came to understanding the things of God. They were surrounded by two mighty civilisations whose influence continues to this very day, the Greeks and the Romans, but religiously these were like babes in arms in comparison to the Jews. The mighty Romans and the sophisticated Greeks were still worshipping the mythical gods when the Chosen People were ready and able to accept and understand, if they had been willing to, the profound teachings of Christ. The nations had not even entered the infants' class when the Jews were already at university!

It was not only theological matters that the Jews were taught over those two thousand years of revelation but spirituality as well. Perhaps the most persistent lesson of the Old Testament is trust in God, the faithful God who never lets you down. He proved himself resolutely faithful in the face of constant disobedience and infidelity on the part of his Chosen People. He taught them to trust him no matter what, and when they did, all went well with them. He taught them to

be mindful always of what He had done for them, for in remembering his wonderful interventions they would learn to trust and love Him the more. He taught them to pray, giving them the Psalms, the most beautiful prayer-book ever written. These virtues and many others, developed in the Chosen People over those long centuries, found their perfect flowering in Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

The lessons those Jews needed to learn, we still need to learn. The spirituality that inspired them must still inspire us and be, as the Lord indicated, the foundation of our Christian Way.

God spent two thousand years preparing his People to receive his Son, teaching them by word and deed the lessons every human being needs to learn. Although Christ has come and we, by the Spirit's grace, have already received Him, we still need to learn those lessons God Himself tried to instil into the Jews, how to achieve in our humanity that perfect Christlikeness which is the Father's dream for all his children. That is why, in the last chapter, I suggested we spend time through the week praying and reflecting on the Sunday Scriptures, with the Old Testament reading receiving as much attention as the others, for despite what it may sometimes seem, it's

message and relevance is as contemporary and as pertinent today as it ever has been.

## 14. THE PSALMS IN THREE VOICES

The Psalms have a secret all their own. They speak, or rather they sing (for they are songs really), in three voices. At every Mass we say or sing a psalm or part of a psalm. We have just listened to God in the first reading, and we reply to Him in the Psalm, in three voices.

The Psalms are the Prayer Book of the Jews, both today and when they prayed their way through those long centuries leading up to the coming of their promised Messiah. Most pious Jews would have known the Psalms off by heart; Our Lady certainly would, and also her Son. As they have God for their divine Author, it is no wonder they are often described as the most beautiful prayers ever written. With the coming of Christ, they passed smoothly into the patrimony of the Church. They are now the Church's Prayer Book too.

Their human author was King David (though many of the Psalms were written by others). They were written in the context of every kind of human situation you could think of: when David was victorious in war or in fear of his life; when he was repentant for the serious sins he had committed; when he was fleeing from his enemies or filled with hatred for them; or when he was exulting in the sense of God's beauty and the magnificence of his creation. Every human sentiment is there; sometimes shockingly there, as when one Psalm prays that the heads of their enemies' babies be smashed against a rock! Such a sentiment would not be allowed public expression today even after the nine o'clock watershed!

Whatever mood you may find yourself in, you will find a Psalm to suit it. But the Psalm of the Mass, over which you have no choice, may well not fit your mood at all. You may be full of the joys of spring while the Psalm is filled with melancholy. So how do you pray a psalm which is not reflecting your present feelings or frame of mind? Do you just choose another one? In the Mass you can't do that.

But there is a way of praying such a psalm; now we must see how. Let's look at the three voices which gave this chapter its title.

**First Voice:** The Psalms were the outpouring of David's innermost soul to God. There was no beating about the bush with him; he called a spade a spade, even to Almighty God. These expressions of his own raw emotions became the cry of Christ and his disciples down the ages. Like David, we too can feel anger, joy, resentment, love, peace, turmoil; like David we are sinners seeking to be saints.

Like David, we need to be honest before God; He doesn't want us telling Him how full of sweetness and light we are when in reality we are furiously and darkly angry. Here then is the First Voice of the trio of voices: *mine*, speaking honestly to my God, telling Him not what I fancy He might like to hear but just how it is.

**Second Voice:** The Psalms are inspired. They are therefore God's word. God's Word is Christ. When I say a Psalm, God's Word becomes alive and active in me, Christ prays to his Father in me and through me.

Listen to that Voice in your mind as you read the text and recognise it for what it is. When the text is the Scriptures generally, it is the Voice of Christ *speaking* within me and revealing his Father to me. When the text is the Psalms, it is the Voice of Christ, *praying* to

his Father for me and for the whole world. Thus the Second Voice in the trio of voices is Christ's, a Voice which lifts my prayer to unimaginable heights.

**Third Voice:** This Voice is the Church's, which not only raises my prayer to unimaginable heights, but widens it to unimaginable horizons.

When I pray, I pray as one who belongs to the Church. That is exactly what I am. This is the truest thing about me. That is what Baptism and the Eucharist have done to me. I am not a lone individual, not a voice crying in the wilderness. I am a member of Christ; a member of his Body. I belong to Him and am part of Him, as much as my own arm belongs to me and is part of me. I am a branch of the Christ Vine. Cut off from Him I can only wither and die. I am part of what St Augustine calls the *whole Christ*, by which he means the Church.

So, I pray as part of Christ, as a member of the Whole Christ, as a member of the whole Church. I cannot pray otherwise, for that is what I am.

This explains why I can sincerely say an angry Psalm when I am feeling peaceful, or a joyful one when I am feeling sad. At one level my personal feelings are irrelevant. I am praying *as* the Church, *with* the

Church *for* the Church, *in* and *through* all her members whatever their present state of mind or body may be.

Praying the Psalms with Christ in this way slowly but surely cures my innate selfishness. It leads me into the sufferings of others: it makes me compassionate:

- In full health and strength, I find myself praying for healing;
- loved and cared for, I pray as one hated and deprived;
- well fed and nourished, as if I were famished;
- safe and secure, I pray as a hounded and homeless refugee;
- living in a country that respects human rights and religious freedom, I pray as if I am being hounded and persecuted for my faith;
- at peace with all around me, I pray as one encircled by deadliest enemies;
- full of life, I pray as one in the throes of death.

So I discover the deepest meaning of solidarity, for I am not just praying *for* these people but *with* them and *in* them, for they too are in the Whole Christ and are therefore part of me. And the flip side of all this, of course, is the wonder of knowing that I myself am being held up in prayer before God by all those

millions of others who, like me, are praying the Psalms.

## 15. THE SECOND READING

In the first chapter, we showed how the second reading came to be part of the Mass. It was St Paul ordering his letters to be circulated around the newly founded Churches and read at their meetings. And what more fitting meeting was there than the celebration of the Eucharist?

Paul wrote one letter to the Christians in Rome; three to the Church at Corinth (one of which got lost); one each to the Churches at Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and two letters to the Church at Thessalonica. He wrote personal letters to Timothy and Titus, his converts whom he was training to succeed him as Bishop; and one to Philemon, the master of a run-away slave whom Paul sends back with this letter asking for clemency.

The New Testament also contains two letters from St Peter, a letter from St James, three from St John and one from St Jude. The Letter to the Hebrews, a

wonderful meditation on the Priesthood of Christ, was written by an unknown author. The Church declares all these letters to be inspired, though in some cases she is not sure they were written by the person whose name they carry. But that does not matter nor is it our concern here.

Also in the New Testament there are two other writings which often appear in our Second Reading at Mass: the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation of St John (often referred to as the *Apocalypse*).

The Acts of the Apostles was written by St Luke as the continuation of his Gospel; it takes the story of the Church beyond the Resurrection (c. AD 33) to the imprisonment of St Paul at Rome (c. AD 62). It is an invaluable thirty year history of the early Church.

The Apocalypse is the work of St John, Apostle and writer of the fourth Gospel, who shares with his persecuted fellow Christians a vision he received from Jesus on the Island of Patmos where, as an old man now, he had been exiled for his preaching of the Faith. It is written in coded language which the Christians could understand but which the persecuting Romans could not.

All these writings, along with the Four Gospels, were accepted by the Church into her *Canon of Scripture* and declared inspired. All of them appear at some time or other in the Second Reading of our Sunday Masses. When there is no Second Reading, as at a weekday Mass, they can appear as the First Reading.

These readings from the New Testament will reward careful attention and prayerful meditation. Paul was divinely inspired with a superhuman wisdom on that day when he was so unceremoniously knocked off his high horse on his way to Damascus. St Peter himself acknowledges that Paul's letters can sometimes be hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), but they are immensely deep and rewarding.

The other Apostles speak with a wisdom which derives equally from Christ, but which did not strike them like a bolt from the blue, as it did with Paul, but from long hours spent in one to one conversation with their Lord and Teacher.

The Gospels record how Jesus would speak to the crowds in parables but afterwards would carefully explain their meaning to his chosen Apostles. Carefully and thoroughly He prepared them to be the Leaders of his Church and the Teachers of his people. Through these wonderful letters they continue to

instruct us in the art of being Christian, passing on to us what they themselves had received from the very mouth of the Lord.

## 16. THE GOSPEL

Have you ever dared to peer into the world of Greek Mythology? A vast array of gods you will find there, of super-human beings who controlled and dominated every aspect of human life and whose behaviour was, by our standards, debauched and degrading, and who begot offspring equally perverse. They were very real to the ancient peoples and exerted huge influence on their lives. People stood in great fear of them and felt the constant need to propitiate them and keep them on side. Sometimes they would even sacrifice their children to them. How it was with the ancient Greeks, so it was with the Romans and all the ancient civilisations of the world.

The Gospel, when it was proclaimed to these peoples, appeared as sheer liberation: liberation from the life-long tyranny of these gods; liberation from the fear of death which had nothing to promise but the gods'

continued company. Now God is revealed as the source of all goodness and love, promising eternal blessedness to all who want it. Would that we could recapture the excitement and sense of liberation those ancient pagans felt who heard for the first time the message of the Gospel! *A Light to enlighten the Gentiles* indeed! ((Luke 2:32)

Conditioned by a mindset formed by over two thousand years of Christianity, we cannot begin to imagine the impact the first preaching of the Gospel had on the ancient pagan world. Even up to the time when our English language was forming, the dominant definition of Christianity was *Good News*. And this is precisely where our word *Gospel* comes from: the Old English words *good* and *spel* (news) joined together. Because of the likeness between the words *good* and *god*, the words fused into *Godspel*, and finally became *Gospel*.

But, sadly, with two thousand years of Christianity behind us and the Good News preached to every nation under heaven, we still have not totally escaped the tyranny of those ancient gods. We continue to put ourselves and our lives at the service of created things: wealth, power and influence, gods who promise but never deliver. The Gospel message is as

relevant today as ever it was; we can never afford to stop listening to it.

*Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear*, Our Lord says repeatedly. If we listen with ears that hear, the Gospel will be good, challenging and liberating news for our generation today as much as it was for its first hearers.

## **Liturgical Symbols Surrounding the Proclamation of the Gospel**

The Liturgy loads the Gospel with various honorary signs to emphasise its primacy within the Liturgy of the Word.

The Gospel Book is given great honour. Solemnly it is carried aloft in the entrance procession, the Word of God leading us, a light to our path. It is laid on the Altar where it remains until the Priest or Deacon retrieves it and, accompanied by acolytes, proceeds ceremoniously to the lectern. We all stand, singing our *Alleluias* and welcoming Christ, the Word of God and Light of the World, who speaks to his people through the human voice.

It is an ancient tradition that only the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel. The candles which led the procession flank him, emphasising again the theme of

light. Incense is used, reminding us that the words we are about to hear are holy; *a Reading from the Holy Gospel*, he says. We all sign ourselves with that ancient form of the Sign of the Cross, made with thumb, on forehead, lips and breast, praying that the Word and Light of Christ may be in our mind, on our lips and in our heart. When the Priest has finished the proclamation, he kisses the Gospel Book, showing it all the reverence it deserves.

Christ's Gospel opens to us a new vision of what it really means to be human. What He proposes is wholly contrary to what we and society take for granted as being the normal way of living, and completely opposed to the gods we have created for ourselves. If you want to be rich, give your things away; if you want to be powerful, get down on your knees, wash the feet of the poor and be content with the lowest place of all; if you want to be truly clever, become a fool in the eyes of the world, so foolish as to believe that the one true God loved the world so much that He became Man, stretched out his arms on a Cross and died for us. This is the Gospel and it is only when we believe it wholeheartedly and rise courageously to its challenge that we find our horizons broadened immeasurably, discover we are made of sterner stuff than we first thought, and experience the true freedom of the children of God.

## 17. THE HOMILY

It used to be called the sermon, so why this change of name? One of the definitions of *homily* in the Oxford English Dictionary is a “tedious moralising lecture”! The same dictionary defines *sermon* as “a long or tedious piece of admonition or reproof”. What both definitions have in common is the adjective *tedious*, i.e. boring. Well, what do you know?

The Church decided on this change of name to differentiate the homily from the kind of pulpit-bashing oratory of old, as some of us well remember, all hell fire and brimstone. Getting away from that kind of rhetoric, the Church wants her ministers to speak to their congregations as a father talks to his family.

So if the homily is supposed to be like a father chatting to his children, why, according to the dictionary and our own experience, are people so frequently bored by it? Is it entirely the fault of the

priest? I have known people leave the parish because the homily down the road was a few minutes shorter!

Maybe we get bored so easily because we have heard it all before - countless times. When you listen to a CD over and over again, it eventually gets stale, no matter how enthusiastic you were to start with.

But between listening repeatedly to a recording and listening to a homily, there is something fundamentally different. A clue to this, surprisingly, lies in the priest's vestments.

There are many reasons why he doesn't celebrate Mass in his suit like a nonconformist minister conducting a prayer service. Nor are vestments worn simply to add colour to the proceedings, though the Church does want the Mass to be a beautiful happening, with priest and people using all their available talent for the glory of God. Vestments are meant to put the priest in disguise, hiding the man and pointing to Christ. While the priest remains himself, using his own particular talents, the actual focus is on Christ, the One who is really preaching the homily and proclaiming the Gospel. And here lies the remedy to our boredom.

When it comes to the homily, the priest preaches as best he may, but behind his human efforts is the presence and power of Christ. It is He who is ultimately addressing his family. By failing to recognise this, we miss the many splendored thing; it is not the Priest, it is Christ. And Christ is never boring.

Our Lord frequently presents himself as the Sower, sowing seeds in all sorts of terrain, with some seed taking root and others falling on barren ground. So important does He consider this image of Himself that he meticulously explains this particular parable to the apostles. The seed, He tells us, is his word; the soil is our hearts, the sower is Himself. In the homily Christ is scattering and sowing the good seed of his word. The terrain before him is as mixed as anyone could possibly imagine: men, women and children from every conceivable background and with every imaginable potential.

The word He speaks may strike good soil in one person's heart and leave another's barren.

Occasionally it is something the priest throws out as an aside that Christ uses to touch the heart of a particular listener. I remember once meeting a young priest who told me that he became a priest because of something I had said in a sermon. I knew what he

meant, though equally I knew that his vocation was not of my doing; my words had simply triggered off something that had been brewing for years in his inner self under the gentle influence of the Holy Spirit. But it took that sermon to trigger it. Only Christ can do that sort of thing.

So, approach the homily with *expectation*. Recognise that Christ is speaking to you. Expect to be enlightened and challenged. Expectation drives out boredom. Something will strike you if you listen.

What exactly *is* Christ saying to *me*? What does He *want* of *me*? Sense the excitement of it.

Often something strikes me in this way even when I myself am doing the preaching! I always preach to myself as much as to the congregation. I may be the preacher, but I am still a field of Christ's sowing, and my own sermon can often hit me squarely between the eyes. And for every inspiration I recognise, I am sure there are many others I don't. We have to train our ears. *Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.*

We all have ears, but only those who have received the Spirit have ears to hear the Voice of the Son of God. Unless we listen in faith to the homily, recognising the voice of Christ and opening ourselves to the seed that He is sowing, the homily will have

little effect and we will inevitably be bored, just as the dictionary predicted!

But if we listen in faith, we give Christ and the Spirit the opportunity they are looking for. While the preacher is doing his job in the pulpit, the Holy Spirit is doing his job in our hearts: divine co-operation, Christ and his Spirit. Without Christ there is no divine seed; without the Spirit there is no living water. On its own the soil is barren and unfit to receive the seed that is sown.

In every sermon, no matter what it is about, no matter how long or short it is, no matter how eloquent or otherwise the priest may be who is delivering it, there is seed there that Christ wants to sow in your heart while the Spirit is there eager to water, germinate and cultivate it. It is there for the taking.

## 18. THE CREED

We have listened to the Word of God in the readings; we have heard it being explained and expounded in the homily; now we tell God that we believe it. We stand and say the Creed.

The first thing to say about the Creed we recite at Mass is that it is one of many.

From the very beginning, the Church has always felt the need to put down on paper a succinct expression of what she believes and then to use it in her catechising and teaching.

The very early creeds were all associated with the preparation of the *Catechumen* (the ancient name given to a person preparing for Baptism). They were formulated accordingly, responding to Christ's final command to his Church: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Mt 8:19)*. Consequently, all the creeds have a trinitarian formulation, expressing in turn belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and going on to declare faith in the Church, of which the catechumen is about to become a member.

## **The Nicene Creed**

As the years progressed and the Church came to understand Christ's revelation more deeply, so the creeds became longer and more detailed. The Creed we usually recite at Mass is called the *Nicene Creed*,

which gets its name from a Council held at Nicaea (the present town of Iznik, Turkey) in the year 325.

Up to this date, councils of bishops had met in various regions of the world to thrash out local problems, but the Council of Nicaea was the first council to represent the whole Catholic Church. It is therefore the first *Ecumenical Council* (the word *ecumenical* originally means *universal*). There have been nineteen since, the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s being the twentieth and the last one so far.

Since Nicaea, all councils have been known by the name of the place where they were held.

### **Infallibility of an Ecumenical Council**

Jesus gave Peter the power of “binding and loosing”: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” (Matthew 16:19) This is the foundation of the Church’s teaching on the infallibility of the Pope, as we shall discuss later.

But on another occasion Christ gave the same authority to *all* the Apostles gathered around Peter (Matt 18:18). For this reason, the Church believes also in the infallibility of a full Council of Bishops, of

those who have legitimately succeeded the Apostles and whose position in the present day Church is exactly the same as that of the Apostles in the earliest days.

If these assembled Bishops are truly representative of the whole Catholic Church and not just a region of it, and provided they conduct their business in agreement with the successor of Peter, the contemporary Pope, then the Church believes that such a Council will have the power of binding and loosing and will be guided into all truth, according to the promise of Christ: *when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.* (Jn 16:13). The Council of Nicaea was the first council to fulfil these criteria, being of world-wide representation and meeting with the Pope's approval and authority.

The Creed, which the Council approved, is therefore regarded by the Church as infallible, its truth guaranteed by the promises made by Christ to his Church. It is held by virtually the whole of Christendom, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and many other Christian sects - though, it must be said, apart from the Catholics and Orthodox, these other churches do not always understand it in the way the *Council Fathers* (the usual term to describes the Pope and Bishops of a Council) intended it to be understood

(and, therefore, their recitation of it does not necessarily guarantee the orthodoxy of their faith).

## **The Apostles' Creed**

The other Creed which may be used at Mass is the familiar *Apostles' Creed*. This is the Creed most of us learnt as children. Unlike the Nicene Creed, this one did not issue from an ecumenical council, but developed over the years in the very early Church at Rome. It too was associated principally with the rite of Baptism. Why it came to be known as the *Apostles' Creed* was because legend claimed that it was composed by the Apostles themselves, each contributing one of its twelve articles!

### **NOTE ON OUR COVERAGE OF THE CREED**

It would take a book of greater length than this to deal adequately with the contents of the Creed. Yet there are certain aspects of the Faith that the educated Catholic should know about, such as the controversy

over the *Filioque* clause, the history behind the word *Consubstantial* and the meaning and importance of the *Apostolicity of the Church*. These are dealt with in the following chapters, together with other key elements of the Creed.

The following chapters, 19 to 31, deal with these important theological matters, understanding of which will certainly enhance our understanding and appreciation of the Mass as a whole. But if you wish to get on with the direct study of the Liturgy of the Mass, skip these chapters and resume with Chapter 32 where the Prayers of the Faithful, which directly follow the Creed, will be discussed.

## 19. I OR WE

*(This chapter is the beginning of our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed).*

At the very heart of Catholicism is the ideal of community, the divine Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit reflected in the Church. We can therefore forgive the translators of the earlier English version of

the Creed for changing its wording from *I believe* to *We believe*, but it was a change out of line with ancient Catholic tradition, and was rectified in the 2011 revision.

Faith is the fundamental virtue on which depends our whole relationship with God. It is itself a gift, an initiative of God, a personal invitation from Him. To this very personal invitation to believe is the very personal response of faith, a leap into the hands of God, something you can only do on your own, in the depth of your own soul.

Therefore *I* rather than *We* must be the subject of the verb. We profess our faith together in community; but we profess it first and foremost as an individual human being responding personally to a personal invitation from God.

## 20. Creed : ONE GOD

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

## **The Creed professes faith in One God.**

It took hundreds of years for God to get it into the heads of his Chosen People that He was the one and only God. In common with all ancient peoples, the early Israelites believed in a plurality of gods. It would seem that a sense of God is born with us, an awareness that there is a power or powers over and above us, controlling both ourselves and the universe in which we live. It is innate knowledge; for this we do not need a teacher. What does not come naturally, however, is whether this Being is one or many.

Sensing the existence of God yet not knowing anything about him or them, the ancient peoples created gods for themselves. They concocted them with human, animal and imaginary characteristics; but most of all they created them in their own immoral and depraved image and likeness.

At first the Israelites thought that their God was just bigger and stronger than the rest of the gods (“my daddy is stronger than your daddy” syndrome) and included Him in a pantheon of gods. But as God’s revelation to his Chosen People progressed over the centuries, and as He demonstrated his power, wisdom and holiness before their very eyes, they came to realise that their God was different and indeed the one

and only God, the idols of the pagans being mere nothings.

When nearly 2000 years of revelation had run their course and the time for the coming of Christ had arrived, the Jews alone on the face of the earth were a *monotheistic* people, the only nation believing in a single God. Civilisations on every side of them, far more powerful, intellectual and developed than they, still believed in a host of warring and amoral gods and goddesses who ruled the heavens and the earth.

*I believe in one God* seems pretty obvious to us now with 2000 years of Christian history behind us, but it took God nearly that same length of time to drum it into the heads of his Chosen People.

## 21. Creed : FATHER AND CREATOR

*This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

There are many things we take for granted about God but the most telling of all is that we call Him *Father*. We don't think twice about it. But before God began to reveal Himself to the Jewish People in the Old Testament, the gods were anything but fathers to the

ancient peoples, as we have already seen. Jesus brought this crucial revelation to its climax by habitually calling God *Abba*, a child's word which translates as *Daddy*.

Through the years of revelation leading up to Christ, God slowly but increasingly revealed himself as a *Father-God*. Towards his Chosen People He behaved exactly as a good and loving father would behave towards his wife and children. During all the vicissitudes of their long period of preparation, the Children of Israel experienced God as One who loved, cared, nourished, guided, educated, defended and saw them safely through to maturity.

As baptised Christians, we have even greater warrant for addressing God as Father. The Sacrament of Baptism has given us a new birth. We are born again with water and the Holy Spirit who is the very Life of God Himself. We have received divine Life from Him just as we have received human life from our parents.

In as real and strict a sense as we are children of our own parents, so Baptism has made us children of God. *Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be*

*born again*' (John 3:4-6). Children of the same parents are family; the Church is quite literally the Family of our Father-God.

## **Maker of Heaven and Earth**

The Creed goes on to describe our Father as *Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible*. We know that creation is the work of the Triune God, but it is traditionally ascribed to the Father alone. He creates *through* his Word and *in* the Holy Spirit.

When we use the word *Maker* to describe God, we need to take care what we mean. The Apostles' Creed prefers the word *Creator*. In our everyday conversation the words are interchangeable: we talk about the maker of a computer and the creator of a computer programme. But theology has a stricter use of the words.

Someone who makes something makes it out of available materials: the carpenter makes his table out of wood; the computer boffin makes his product from electronic circuit boards which someone else has already made. But a Creator makes something *out of nothing*; and the only person capable of this is God. That's the difference between making and creating.

The Book of Genesis gives its account of Creation in story-form, and we all know how powerful story-telling is in transmitting truth. We use stories all the time; life could not go on without them - not just children's stories either, but stories of the kind we all enjoy, films, plays, novels, not to mention our neighbour's gossip! Even advertisers on the television these days manage, at enormous expense, to cram their message into a story of half a minute's duration.

As television advertisements in story-form graphically prove, the truth of a story lies not in its colourful features but in its message. Not in the details of the Seven Days does the message of the story lie, where the author of Genesis keeps us on the edge of our seat wondering what will be created next. The truth of the Genesis story of Creation is simply that God creates the Universe out of *nothing*.

The seven days are but an example of that colourful detail, which every story has, to make it memorable. To take the seven days as critical to the story and to try to see in them some indication as to how God actually did create the universe is to miss the point altogether. Whether He created the Universe with the click of a divine finger (as Creationists believe) or whether He created it over billions of years of divinely led and wisely controlled evolution (as

science and most of us believe) is really of no consequence to what the story is really saying. The Genesis story is simply affirming that without the Creator there would simply be *nothing*.

Because God made all things out of nothing, he must *hold them in being*. The carpenter can turn and leave his table unattended and it will be there when he returns, for it is made out of wood created by God. But God cannot leave his creation unattended for it is made out of nothing. The act of creation is therefore not something over and done with, as the Genesis story can easily imply, but *an on-going process* which will continue forever, even after Christ has come again in glory.

This is what we mean by *Providence*: that every second of every day, God is holding in being, keeping in existence, every atom of creation. And not only every material atom, but also every spiritual being, from the idea in my head to the mightiest archangel in heaven. So the Creed affirms that He is *Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible*. God is Being Itself, and he holds all things in being, all things in existence.

The Creator God has left a trail behind Him which He challenges us to follow. Every new discovery of

science is a further pointer to the Creator, who devised it in the first place and on whom it depends, a further revelation to us of God, our ever creating Father. The vast diversity of the created world, collectively and individually, shows us something of the goodness, beauty and wisdom of God. *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (Psalms 19:1-4)*

## 21. Creed : THE CONSUBSTANTIAL SON

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

The Church has a nose for truth; a kind of sixth sense given her by Christ - just as our physical sense of smell warns us that something has gone off in the fridge or that a delicious Sunday roast is being prepared in the kitchen! The Second Vatican Council called it the *sensus fidei* : a sense the faithful instinctively have, giving them awareness when

something is right or something is wrong with a particular expression of the Faith. Undoubtedly, this sense deep within the Christian is the Spirit of Truth keeping the Church forever faithful to the *deposit of faith* which Jesus originally left in the safe keeping of his Church.

The early Church felt decidedly uneasy when a person by the name of Arius (256-336) began to spread abroad his personal theological opinions. He was a refined gentleman and scholarly, whose origins were probably in Libya, though his working life was mainly in Egypt. We are told he was very attractive to the ladies and respected by the aristocracy. He became a priest but was excommunicated for his erroneous opinions.

He claimed that if Jesus is the Son of God, then He must come after his Father, just as all children naturally and necessarily succeed their parents in time. Arius argued like this: If Christ is the Son of God, there must have been a time when the Son of God did not exist. Therefore He must have been created, must be a creature.

Arius affirmed that, though created by God, Christ was born of the Father *before time began* and was the

only creature God ever directly made; everything else was created by God *through* Him.

This idea, which had been brewing in certain quarters of the Church for a long time and came to a head with Arius, became known as the *Arian Heresy*. It nearly split the Church in half; it nearly destroyed Christianity, and ended up being the origin of the Muslim Faith.

Arius' doctrine was appealing because it got round Christianity's most difficult tenet: that God is a Trinity, a mystery that defies human understanding. It is easier to believe in a God who created a *special agent* through whom He did his creating than to believe in one God who is also a Trinity of three distinct Persons.

If Arius had had his way, this central truth of divine revelation, that God is a Trinity, would have been lost. The Arian Christians of Saudi Arabia followed this doctrine and the outcome was Islam.

He would also have robbed Christianity of its very soul, and the Faith would never have survived. He would have emptied the Crucifixion and the Redemption of all their meaning and power. If Christ had not been God, the Crucifixion would have been

simply the execution of an innocent man and the Resurrection would have been no different from that of Lazarus. That Christ is really and truly God is of the essence of Christianity, the truth that makes our Faith what it is, utterly unique. To say of Christ that he is God's *Special Agent* of creation, the most close-to-God human being that ever existed, of all men the most gifted and charismatic, *but* that He is *not* God Incarnate, destroys Christianity all together.

## **The Council's Response**

The Fathers of the Council of Nicaea knew from Scripture, from the constant teaching and tradition of the Church and from their own *sensus fidei* that Jesus was God from God, born of the Father before time began, and that through Him all things were made. It was imperative that this be spelt out in an infallible Creed and that this heresy be once and for all put to rest.

The earlier Apostles' Creed simply says: *I believe...in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.* This leaves itself wide open to Arius' interpretation of who Christ was.

Consequently the Council of Nicaea expanded the Apostles' Creed to read: *I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.*

## **Consubstantial**

We repeat this word *consubstantial* every Sunday, so let us try to figure out why the Fathers of the Council used it and what exactly it means.

It was a key word in the Council (*homoousion* in the Greek) and much time and energy was spent arriving at it. In fact, the Council had to coin it, for there was no existing word in Greek or Latin which expressed exactly what they wanted to say. The pre-2011 English translation of the Creed rendered it correctly as *of one being* (with the Father), but it is historically and theologically too important a word not to appear in its own right. The present translation has restored it.

The first syllable of *con-substantial* simply means *of the same*. Thus the word means: *of the same substance*. Substance in Greek philosophy had a very specialised meaning and only vaguely corresponds to

what we understand by the same word today. When the Fathers of the Council declared that the Son is *con-substantial* with the Father, they were saying that what God is so the Son is; that He is of the very same being, the very same nature, the very same substance as the Father. Therefore He is *God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.*

Because Christianity proclaims that Christ is consubstantial with the Father, it is the most compassionate religion on the face of the earth. Our Faith affirms that God personally entered our human condition and experienced it for Himself. This means that whatever I experience personally, God has experienced personally as well. He experienced for Himself all that human life can mean: the joys of family life; the sweetness of human love and friendship; but also the ordeal of flight from a tyrant; the sadness of bereavement; the anguish of rejection by friends; the grief of betrayal; the agony of psychological terror; the pang of acute physical pain, and even the trauma of death by crucifixion.

There are many modern *Ariuses* today who, to make Christianity more acceptable to the modern sceptical mind, are prepared to water it down by artfully and deceptively denying the true divinity of Jesus. But

Christianity, Catholicism, is as it is, or it is nothing at all.

## 22. Creed : THE HOLY SPIRIT

*This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

The third part of the Creed deals with the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit. It is common usage in theological language to speak of the First, Second and Third Persons of the Blessed Trinity, but we need to keep carefully in mind that this sequence does not imply in any way whatsoever that the Second and Third Persons are inferior to the First.

The Creed describes the Holy Spirit as *the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.*

### **The Holy Spirit the Lord**

When God revealed his name *Yahweh* to Moses at the Burning Bush, the Jews, too respectful even to pronounce that sacred name, substituted for it the

word *Lord*. When you see the word LORD printed in capitals in your Bible, you know that behind that word, in the original text, is the Divine Name, *Yahweh*. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, therefore, the word *Lord* is equivalent to *God*. It is important to be aware of this when reading the Scriptures or attending the Liturgy.

The earliest Christians applied the title *Lord* to Jesus, and in doing so deliberately affirmed his divinity. So, St Paul: *let every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:11).

*Jesus is Lord* was the earliest Christian Creed. “*If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*”(Romans 10:9).

To give the Holy Spirit the title *Lord* is, therefore, to declare Him divine and equal in every respect to the Father and the Son. To hammer home the point, the Creed adds: *who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified*.

**The Holy Spirit the Giver of Life.**

The Creed goes on to call the Spirit *the Giver of Life*. He is the Giver of Life because He Himself *is* the very Life of God. So, by Him, the Incarnate Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Through Him the Church was born, when the Risen Christ sent the Spirit upon the Apostles and Our Lady on that first Pentecost. Like the sap in the Vine of which Our Lord speaks, like the soul of the Body of which St Paul speaks, the Spirit is the life of the Church. He gives life to us through the Sacraments.

All the Sacraments operate through the Power of the Spirit and exist to give us life and make us holy. He is the Power that came down upon Jesus at his Baptism and worked through Him in parable and miracle throughout his life. The same Spirit changes the bread and wine of the Eucharist and is forgiveness of sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; the same Spirit is Consecration in Priesthood and Divine Love in the binding of the marriage bond. The Holy Spirit is the Power that preaches the Gospel to this very day, who still speaks through the prophets. He is the Power of Christ constantly at work in the Church and the world.

## 23. Creed : FILIOQUE

The Creed further declares of the Holy Spirit that he proceeds from the Father *and* the Son. This is perhaps the most famous *AND* in history, and perhaps the most tragic! Partly because of this *and*, the great eastern Orthodox Churches are separate from Rome to this very day.

*Filioque* is the key word in the story of this split between East and West, the Church's greatest tragedy. It is two Latin words rolled into one: *Filio* is the ablative case of *Filius*, meaning *Son*, and the ablative case makes it mean *from the Son*; the *-que*, which, instead of coming before the word tags onto it, means *and*. So *Filioque* means *and from the Son*.

What it is all about is too complex by far to handle here, but, as intelligent Catholics, we ought to know something about this *Filioque* affair, what it means and why it is part of the baggage which still separates the Orthodox Churches from Rome.

### **The Story of “Filioque”**

It all happened when the early Church was trying to understand and express, as far as is humanly possible, the inner life of the Blessed Trinity.

Here are the bones of the dispute. If you can't make head or tail of it, be assured that it is my inability to explain rather than your inability to understand!

Before the declaration of the Nicene Creed in 325AD, several of the Fathers of the Church had frequently expressed their belief in the fact that within the Life of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit *proceeds* (that's the technical word) from the Father *and* the Son. But when the Council of Nicaea proclaimed its Creed, it simply said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. (It didn't say that the Holy Spirit *doesn't* proceed from the Son, but simply that He *does* proceed from the Father).

Although not expressly stated in the Nicene Creed, it had previously been the accepted faith of the Church that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son. Accordingly, Pope Leo I in 346, declared that this ancient understanding of the inner life of the Blessed Trinity (the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father *and* the Son) was in strict accordance with the faith of the Church, even though not expressly stated in the Nicene Creed, and subsequently he added the

word *filioque* to the Creed. From then on, the Creed ran: *Who proceeds from the Father and the Son*. The Eastern half of the Catholic Church was not well pleased.

## **East and West.**

It is often said that the Church has two great lungs: the East and the West. The Eastern Church, with its natural intense interest in spirituality (witness people still travelling east to find their gurus), has a passionate interest in the role of the Spirit – within God, within the Church and within the soul of each of us. The Western part of the Church, on the other hand, with its tradition and mindset formed by the ancient Roman Empire, tends to be more legalistic and down to earth.

The two parts of the Church are like Twin Sisters brought up in different cultures, each a blood sister to the other, but each with a different way of thinking.

This cultural difference contributed greatly to the Two Sisters falling out and not being able to sing from the same hymn sheet ever since. Because of their

different upbringing, the two Sisters do things differently – *but what they do is essentially the same!*

In terms of Liturgy and Church management, the Orthodox Churches operate very differently from the Catholic Church. Their liturgy of the Mass, for example, is outwardly very unlike ours, but inwardly essentially the same. The Faith of the Catholic Church and the Faith of the Orthodox Churches concur exactly - excepting the *filioque* clause and the role of the Pope. The Catholic Church recognises the validity of the Holy Orders of the Bishops, Priests and Deacons of the Orthodox Churches, acknowledging that, unlike the Churches of the Reformation, they have not broken the line of *Apostolic Succession*. (We shall consider the meaning of Apostolic Succession in chapter).

If the Holy Orders of the Orthodox Churches are valid, which they are, their Sacraments are valid too. The Church, therefore, allows inter-communion between us, permitting Catholics to receive Holy Communion at the Orthodox *Liturgy* (their word for the Mass) and they at ours.

## **The Pope**

As Pope Leo 1 was responsible (and rightly) for defining what the ancient Catholic Faith had always believed and for putting the *Filioque* clause into the Creed, it was papal authority which the Eastern Church rejected, not immediately but ultimately, in the great and tragic eleventh century split between East and West.

The Orthodox position today is to regard the Pope of Rome as a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals, recognising the primacy of the Roman See, but not acknowledging those papal charismas which the Catholic Church accepts.

It is the greatest longing in the heart of the Catholic Church that the Twin Sisters be reconciled again. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit, over whom the Sisters initially fell out, may be the very power that will ultimately bring them together again.

## 24. Creed : ONE CHURCH

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

The Church - we should love her more than anything on earth, more even than wife or husband, children or grandchildren and infinitely more than any material wealth we may hold, for Christ has commanded us so to do, and because what comes to us through the Church cannot be compared with anything else on earth. The Church gives us God as our Father, Christ as our Brother, the Holy Spirit as the One who enlivens and sanctifies us. The Church fills us with the divine presence and puts us into a communion with God, closer even than the blood relationships we have with our very own family. This is hard to believe, harder still to live by, but it is Gospel truth.

The Creed, having spelt out the Church's faith in the Holy Spirit, goes on to profess what the Church believes about herself. This is summed up in four key adjectives: *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*.

### **The Church Is One.**

The Church is one in many ways, but first and foremost she is one in herself.

Notice the ancient habit of speaking of the Church in female terms. You will notice that the 2011 translations reintroduce this tradition, which the earlier version had shunned. The Church, like a

mother, brings us to birth at the Baptismal font (often referred to as the *womb of the Church*), she feeds us, educates us, cares for us and forgives us, just as any mother would her child. This is a most ancient tradition: the New Testament itself speaks of the Church as the Bride of Christ.

She is *one* in herself, for it is evident that Christ did not found many churches but one; he did not found the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church and the Baptist Church and the rest of them; he founded one Church, which he built on Peter and which he promised would endure for ever with his abiding help.

The Catholic Church believes that the Church Christ founded *subsists* in its fullness in the Catholic Church alone. *This Church constituted and organised in the world as a society, **subsists** in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure.* (Vatican Council II's Constitution on the Church, Chapter 1)

In other words, all that Christ intended his Church to be and to have are preserved in their entirety and integrity only in the Catholic Church. The other

churches over the centuries have lost some of the essential elements which Christ intended his Church to have. We saw in the last section how even the Orthodox Churches, which have retained so much of the deposit of faith left by Christ and kept utterly faithful to it (thus deserving of the name *Orthodox*), have lost touch in the course of history with that central authority and rock of stability and unity which Christ gave to his Church in the person of Peter and his successors.

The Churches of the Reformation have lost much more of that original core and at times, lacking the infallible guidance of Peter, have actually altered parts of the content of the Faith. The bottom line is that the Catholic Church alone retains the fullness of the faith Christ committed to the Apostles. This is not so much a matter of theology but a fact of history.

On the positive side, we must always bear in mind that the elements these Churches have retained are good and wholesome (as the above quotation from Vatican II makes clear), elements like the Sacred Scriptures and the Sacrament of Baptism, elements that belong to the original Church. These elements put these Christians into *partial communion* with the Catholic Church.

The Christians who attend these Churches and believe in their doctrines are often exemplary disciples of Christ, deserving of our greatest respect. But true ecumenism is not to pretend that one church is as good as another, but to face the facts of history in an attitude of Christian truth and love.

To sum up, therefore: Christ founded one Church, and that Church today *subsists* in its fullness only in the Roman Catholic Church.

### **The Catholic Church is one in other respects too**

It is her commission to bring the world into unity, making nations and individuals at one with God and with one another. She preaches one faith the world over; celebrates everywhere the same Sacraments, and enjoys unity under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome.

## **25. Creed : HOLY CHURCH**

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

As Christ is both human and divine, so the Church, which is his Body, is also human and divine. Every scandal in the Church bears witness to her human dimension. The Church is a community of sinners (with the exception of Our Lady, who is a member of the Church too) seeking to be saints, as we have already observed.

But the Church is also *divine*; she is therefore essentially holy. She is Christ amongst us. What Christ is, so is his Church; what Christ does, so his Church does. She speaks to the world the Word of God, as He did, keeping alive the great revelation that came in his Name. She administers the holy and healing Sacraments, bringing life to the world and forgiveness to the sinner as He did when He was physically among us. She is full of love as He was, inspiring hope where there was none before. She is forever suffering in her members and forever rising from the dead. She is all this because she is Christ in the world, the Whole Christ, the Holy Christ.

All these activities of Christ in his Church are directed to one aim: our holiness of life. The Church, essentially holy herself, has, according to Vatican II, a vocation to make everyone holy. *The Church, whose mystery is being set forth by this Sacred Synod, is believed to be indefectibly holy. Indeed Christ, the Son*

*of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as uniquely holy, loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up for her. He did this that He might sanctify her. He united her to Himself as His own body and brought it to perfection by the gift of the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: .( 1 Thess. 4.3; cf. Eph.1:4) “For this is the will of God, your sanctification”.*  
(Vatican council II. Constitution on the Church. Chapter 5)

## 26. Creed : CATHOLIC CHURCH

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

We so often use the word *Catholic* to differentiate one community of Christians from another: Catholics and Protestants, for example. But it is not a divisive word, far from it. It has a history and a meaning all its own. Just as the words One, Holy, and Apostolic express essential qualities of the Church, so too does the word *Catholic*.

To understand it, we have to take ourselves back into pre-Christian times, back into the world of the Jews as they awaited their promised Messiah, and to remind ourselves that they, among all the peoples of the earth, were the Chosen People of God. They were chosen by God to bring into the world his Only Begotten Son, to be a light to the nations and to take God's revealed salvation to every creature under heaven. *And now the Lord says 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth'* (Isaiah 49:6).

Naturally they were very conscious of their exalted calling and of the unique position they held among the nations. But it went sour; it went to their head. Instead of seeing themselves chosen for God's purposes, to *be the light for the Gentiles, that his salvation might reach to the ends of the earth*, they saw themselves chosen for their own sake. In their mind, the world divided into two, the Jews and the Gentiles, 'us and them'. with the word *Gentiles* simply meaning *everyone else*. This attitude was bred into the Jewish consciousness over the centuries of their history. It was something they took completely for granted.

But this exclusive mindset of theirs began to cause problems for the early Jewish Christians. That very early Church, together with its entire leadership, was almost entirely Jewish. Was it conceivable, they asked themselves, that a gentile could just walk into the wonderful inheritance they themselves had just entered upon in Christ? Jewish history, with its long centuries of hopes and fears, of struggles and catastrophes, had just reached its triumphant climax in Christ: the Messiah with all his longed-for blessings had actually come. The ancient prophecies had been fulfilled beyond the wildest dreams of the prophets or expectations of the people. God Himself had come among them as Messiah and Saviour.

Suddenly it was obvious that Christianity was what Jewish history had been about all along. Now the Jewish Christians were God's People in a startlingly new way. The big question challenging the Apostles, Jews born and bred as they were, was whether the gentiles were worthy to share it, or even had the right to share it. Easy enough for us to say *Yes of course*; but psychologically it was an extremely difficult decision for them.

To cut a long story short, Paul said Yes, and eventually, around the year 50AD, the other Apostles, gathered in Council in Jerusalem, gave their

unanimous agreement too, thus opening the way for Christianity to break the boundaries of Israel and reach out to the Gentiles (cf. Acts of the Apostles 15). The time had come for God's purposes to be fulfilled by the Jewish Christians, *to be the light for the Gentiles, that God's salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.*

Then something happened which had never been seen before on the face of the earth. As Christianity spread into the pagan world and men and women embraced it, an international family was formed, different from anything ever seen before.

Membership of this family did not depend on blood relationships, or on any particular culture, language, nation or social status. The slave could belong to it as easily as the master; the white man as well as the black, the rich and powerful alongside the destitute poor; no one was superior, no one inferior, no one a stranger. The exiled outsider found a home and the native-born discovered a new meaning of homeland. That family was the Church of Christ, the New People of God. It spread like wild fire across the ancient world and was recognised as something completely new.

*The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world —just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it* says St Paul to his Colossian converts (Col.1:6) as early as, probably, 50AD. It was fresh and clean, in glaring contrast to the debauched religions of the pagans; it was filled with people so enthusiastic for their new religion they would willingly suffer and die for it, just as their Founder had done, and they did this in their hundreds of thousands, first during the Jewish and Roman persecutions and thereafter to this very day.

*Catholic* was their spontaneous description of this new phenomenon: the Catholic Church they called it. The word comes from the Greek, the dominant language at the time, and simply means *universal, or all-embracing. The All-Embracing Church.* It describes exactly how the Church of Christ is and has to be. It could not be otherwise, for God is Father of all, and Jesus Christ our common Saviour. It could not possibly stay, as the Apostles first imagined, confined within the boundaries of Israel.

It could not, for the same reason, be a white church or a black church, or a church for the rich or a church for the poor, as people have tried at times to make it. It could not be a national church either. The Church has to be Catholic; otherwise it contradicts its very own

charter. *Catholic* defines the heart, the very essence, of what the Church is.

The local Catholic Church is a microcosm of the worldwide Catholic Church; it encapsulates in miniature all the qualities of the universal Church: same Peter, same faith, same sacraments. With the mass migration of peoples so common today, our local Catholic churches dramatically show forth in their congregations the real and powerful meaning of the word *Catholic*.

## 27. Creed : APOSTOLIC CHURCH 1

When the Son of God came into this world He came, as it were, in a three dimensional mode: as Prophet/Teacher, as Priest/Sanctifier, and as King/Leader. These three functions define his Mission as Saviour.

What Christians need to know, and indeed need to be convinced of, is that the Church, where they 1) hear the Word, 2) receive the Sacraments, and 3) submit to its laws is the very same Church Christ founded:

- 1. that they hear the very same message and doctrine Jesus taught (Jesus the Prophet);
- 2. that they celebrate the very same sacraments Jesus instituted (Jesus the Priest);
- 3. that they are governed by the very same authority Jesus instituted (Jesus the King).

***The Catholic Church teaches the same doctrine Jesus taught. (Jesus as Prophet)***

To equip the Apostles for their extraordinary mission, Jesus instructed them with the greatest care. The Gospels tell us that while He would speak to the crowds in parables, whose meaning everyone had to work out for themselves, Jesus would speak plainly to the Twelve in the privacy of their own company. He would explain to them what He left unexplained to the rest. Thus for three years these chosen men had Christ, the Light of the World, as their personal tutor. Imagine that! Slowly he explained everything to them, as far as they were able to understand, promising that what they didn't understand the Spirit would eventually make clear.

What the Apostles learned from Jesus' own mouth was vast and wide-ranging, impossible to be expressed explicitly in the short New Testament Scriptures. St John, at the end of his Gospel

acknowledges this: *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.* (John 21:25)

This unwritten strand of Christ's revelation is what the Church calls *Tradition* and which she values greatly. It goes hand in hand with the Scriptures and, as its name implies, has been faithfully passed down the Christian generations. It consists of what the Church inherited from Judaism, together with all that Christ taught his Apostles both in public and in private.

As well as enriching the Church in so many ways, Tradition serves as an interpreter of Scripture. What is not always clear in these sacred writings is illuminated by how the Church has traditionally handled and interpreted the text in question. The Old Testament Scriptures were inspired by God as preparation and groundwork *for the Church*. The New Testament Scriptures were written *by the Church and for the Church*. Only the Catholic Church, therefore, in her *traditional* understanding of the Christ Event, has the ability to interpret the Scriptures authentically and authoritatively.

This so called *Deposit of Faith*, the whole and entire (written and unwritten) revelation left by Christ to his Church, including the whole of the Old Testament teachings (now totally illuminated by the *Christ Event*), was put into the safekeeping of the Church.

That Deposit of Faith, in embryonic form at that time, was ready for the development that would inevitably come about over the Christian centuries, and which Christ foretold when he promised the Apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them into the fullness of truth. The promised Spirit would lead the Church *into* a deeper understanding of what has once and for all been revealed - *not* lead them to further and new revelations. The Church, under the influence of this promised Holy Spirit and responding to historic challenges as they arose, pondered and delved ever deeper into the completeness of revelation contained in the Deposit of Faith. As she did so, her understanding of it widened and deepened and this process will continue, even until Christ will come again. Today we have a deeper understanding of Christianity than any previous generation, while future generations of Catholic Christians will enjoy a keener perception of what has been revealed even than we do ourselves.

On the subject of the *development of doctrine* we owe much to the penetrating insight of St. John Henry Cardinal Newman whose scholarly reflections on this subject were subsequently sanctioned and endorsed by the Second Vatican Council. A baby grows into maturity, with his body and mind developing and expanding all the time. The resulting adult is very different from the infant but still the very same person. So the Church of the twenty-first century, though outwardly very different from the early Church, identifies in every essential with the primitive Church at Pentecost. The acorn and the oak tree (in a nutshell!)

## 28. Creed : APOSTOLIC CHURCH 2

***This chapter continues our exploration of Apostolic Church. The Catholic Church celebrates the very same sacraments Jesus instituted. (Jesus as Priest)***

Jesus commanded his Apostles to celebrate the Eucharist when He said, *Do this as a Memorial of me.*

You could command me to jump over the moon by saying “jump over the moon”, but no matter how much you demanded it, I just couldn’t - I’m not so empowered. You would need furnish me with the necessary paraphernalia - spacesuits and rockets and the rest of it. But to obey the command to jump over the moon would actually be a million times easier than doing what Jesus ordered the Apostles to do at the Last Supper. He had just changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood, and commanded them to do the same!

So, as Jesus said, *Do this as a Memorial of me*, he also enabled and empowered his Apostles to do exactly what He had done. By thus equipping them with a spiritual power like no other - the very power of the Holy Spirit - He shared his Priesthood with them. Or, as we would express it today, *He ordained them bishops*. Likewise, when he commissioned them to forgive sin, He invested them with that same spiritual power. *And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* (John 20:22)

But were these spiritual powers of celebrating the Eucharist and reconciling the sinner given only to the Twelve and just for their lifetime, or was the Lord in

the final stages of equipping his Church for the ages to come?

It stands to common sense that the Lord, who would send them out with a mission to baptise the whole world and who would promise to be with them to the end of time, viewed vastly broader horizons than just first century Palestine. *Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:18-20)

The powers in question were meant for all time and all places, as the Church instinctively and immediately understood. Therefore they needed to be passed on to the Apostles’ successors, to the Church’s future *bishops*. This sacred power (the word *hierarchy* means precisely this) would then be passed on from bishop to bishop, from one generation to the next. The process began with the Apostles and continues still. It is known as ***Apostolic Succession***.

The Jewish People are direct descendants of the twelve sons of *Israel* (*Israelites*), while their priests in

biblical times descended from the single Tribe of *Levi* (*Levitical* Priests). It was a question of ancestry, bloodline and pedigree - for the priests as well as for the people.

But the the New People of God would be different, and so too would their Priesthood be. The Church and her Priesthood would continue down the ages *not by physical lineage, but by spiritual empowerment.*

This spiritual treasure, which Christ passed on to the Apostles, had to be safely guarded. Down the Christian centuries and to this very day many have coveted this spiritual power and falsely claimed it for themselves. Simon the Sorcerer was the first in line: *When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 8:18-19) - hence the origin of the word *simony*.

But this sacred power can neither be bought nor stolen. By Christ's decision, it has been absolutely restricted to the Bishops of the Church, the legitimate successors of the Apostles. It has been handed down in an unbroken chain by sacramental ordination so that the bishop, and only the bishop, enjoys this

spiritual pedigree which reaches back to the High Priesthood of Christ Himself.

The early Church too bears abundant witness to this. Let one quotation from St Ireneus, the second century Bishop of Lyons, suffice:

*Wherefore we must obey the priests of the Church **who have succession from the Apostles**, as we have shown, who, together with succession in the order of bishops, have received the certain mark of truth according to the will of the Father; **all others, however, are to be suspected, who separated themselves from the principal successions** (Against Heresies 4:1)*

So, as early as the second century, St Ireneus is warning against those who have separated themselves from the *succession*. If the succession is broken and then taken up afresh, the person supposedly handing on this spiritual competence cannot impart it to another since he does not possess it himself. This is of crucial importance with regard to the English Reformation.

The bishops of the Catholic Church have received their three-fold spiritual power from Christ, via the Apostles and all the intervening Catholic bishops.

This is why the Catholic Church is so certain of her own authenticity today. So important is this that every Catholic bishop is ordained not by one other Catholic Bishop but by three, thus ensuring that should even two of them be fakes, the succession will be realised by the third! Talk about belt and braces or “making assurance doubly sure”!

### **The College of Bishops.**

The collective name for bishops is *college*, so theology will often speak of the *College of Bishops*. The same word in our ordinary secular sense means an educational establishment or university. If we think of the College of Bishops in this sense, (as we think of the Venerable English and Welsh College at Rome, for example), we find an additional aid to our understanding of Apostolic Succession.

The *Venerabile* remains the Venerabile even though its staff and students are forever changing. The College of Bishops likewise has remained the same even though not one of the original Apostles is still alive and countless thousands of bishops have come and gone in the meantime.

Membership of this College is acquired *exclusively* by Episcopal Ordination, the Sacrament of Orders, when

the Church confers on the candidate the fullness of Christ's priestly power. Such membership automatically puts that person into Apostolic Succession, into direct line of descent from the Apostles.

## 29. Creed : APOSTOLIC CHURCH 3

***The Catholic Church is governed by the very same authority Jesus instituted. (Jesus as King)***

As we have said, there are three major relationships between Christ and his people. He is their *Priest*, their *Prophet* and their *King*. We have now discussed how Jesus passed on his mission as Prophet (teacher) and Priest (sanctifier) to the Apostles. By establishing the Apostolic College (Peter in communion with the Apostles) and by ensuring that this college would remain intact until the end of time, the Lord set up the unchanging leadership of the Church. What Peter, together with the rest of the Apostles, were to the Church at Pentecost, so the Pope and Bishops are to the Church of today, just as they have always been and always will be. The ultimate authority in the Church is the Risen Christ working through the College of

Bishops. (1) Every proclamation of Word, (2) every celebration of Sacrament, (3) every legitimate exercise of authority in the Church is the work of the Risen Christ in the power of his Spirit.

## 30. Creed : BROKEN CHURCH?

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

A commonly held view among non-Catholics is that the early Church, which they refer to as the *Great Church*, has been shattered, like an earthenware vase falling to the ground, leaving the surface covered with its broken pieces, some large, some small. Among the larger shards would be counted the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church; among the smaller, the Anglicans, the Nonconformists and the various sects that are still mushrooming across the world. In this view, the only way to bring the Church to its original integrity would be to superglue all these bits and pieces together, searching for some common denominator which would keep happy every possible shade of opinion.

The Catholic Church, however, does not see things quite so simply. She sees herself as remaining still utterly intact and whole even after any and every group, refusing to accept the ancient faith, has left her. The separation from Rome of the Church of England at the Reformation is an exact example of this. The Catholic Church in Britain was very much smaller in numbers as a result and almost entirely bereft of influence, but in herself she remained essentially exactly what she was before the Anglicans left - one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

The circumstances of history have caused, at various times, dissident groups to break away from the Church and form their own independent Communities. In doing so, they abandoned those elements of the Church with which they didn't agree and took with them those elements with which they did. Then, separated from that authority and guarantor of truth which the Catholic Church enjoys in the person of the Pope and the College of Bishops, they found reason on occasion even to change or abandon some of those original and fundamental doctrines of the ancient Church which they had taken with them. This resulted in a collection of Christian Communities across the world, all resembling the Catholic Church

in various ways but also differing from her, sometimes profoundly.

Thus, while we must respect our Christian brothers and sisters of the other denominations and recognise all that we have in common with them, we must never allow ourselves to forget that the Church *subsists* in its fullness only in the Catholic Church, which remains identical with what the non-Catholics call the Great Church of the earliest years. Groups have separated from the Catholic Church but have not thereby broken or divided her. In herself she remains completely intact. To say, as is fashionable today that “all the churches are the same, that it doesn’t matter which, if any, you attend” is an expression of well-meant ignorance.

### **The Role of the Pope**

Now let us try to throw a little light on the position of the Pope within the Church and why Christ saw the necessity of equipping his Church with such Leadership.

It is clear throughout the Gospels that Peter plays a leading role among the Apostles. But it is in this very familiar passage in St Matthew’s Gospel that his role is clearly set out (Mt 16:13-19): *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his*

*disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (Mt.16:13-20).*

While the other disciples, and probably the Apostles too, were dithering as to who Jesus really was, Jesus' direct question put to Peter receives the perfect reply, a reply that expressed all the faith in Peter's heart in contrast to the confusion and doubt in the minds of the others: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Jesus builds on this faith of Peter, and what he builds is his Church. The Aramaic tongue which Our Lord spoke delighted in using metaphors and highly

ornamental language; in this conversation between Jesus and Peter we see wonderful examples of it.

You are *Peter*, he said. But up to that point he wasn't Peter he was Simon. In fact, up to that point, the name Peter didn't even exist! *Peter* translates, via the Greek, the word that Jesus used, which was *Rock*. In effect, Jesus said to Simon, "from now on your name will be Rock". Then he went on to say *and on this rock I will build my Church*. Peter would be to the future Church what rock foundations are to a house: he would keep it stable and solid so that no earthly power would be able to shake or destroy it.

I will give you the *keys of the kingdom of heaven*. Jesus, having declared that he would build his Church on Peter then gave him authority over it. A key denotes authority. The reason why your house keys are in your pocket and not in mine is because your home is yours, not mine; you have authority over it, not I. Giving Peter the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven is a graphic way of giving him authority over the Church for, in St Matthew's Gospel, the *Kingdom of Heaven* always refers to the Church.

And the *gates of Hades* will not overcome it. A walled city was only as strong as its gates were strong, hence a gate was a symbol of strength. Promising Peter that

the Gates of Hell would not prevail against his Church, Jesus promised that his Church would withstand every external threat and remain always intact, like a city built on rock.

These promises of Our Lord have been completely fulfilled and we can see it for ourselves. The Church has always stood firm, like a city built on rock. Enemies have persecuted her from without; controversies have raged from within; from the very beginning groups of dissenters have separated themselves from her in almost every generation; many of her own members, with popes, bishops and priests among them, have dramatically failed to live up to their Christian ideals, but the Church herself has survived intact, doggedly holding on to the truth and mission originally given to her by Christ. And why? Because she is built on Peter and the Apostles, whose successors have kept her one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

### **The Charisma of Infallibility**

The special charisma of infallibility which the Pope enjoys when he speaks officially on faith or morals derives from the words of Jesus in our text: *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.*

## 31. Creed : LIFE EVERLASTING

*(This chapter continues our exploration of key articles of the Nicene Creed.)*

The resurrection of the body. Do you really mean that my body will rise from the dead? How old will I be (Spiritualists say 30!)? With my arthritis and all? And if everybody is going to rise again, will heaven not be somewhat overcrowded?

That Jesus spoke, and very frequently, about the resurrection of the human body is evident throughout the Gospels. That Christ will come again with his Angels at the end of time, when the dead will rise from their tombs to meet him, is also his constant teaching.

Few people actually believe this article of faith (until it is explained to them) because their thinking doesn't go far enough; it usually stops short at the point of a person's death, when the soul leaves the body and goes before its Maker. Thus far they believe. But this

is not far enough, nor is it the end of the story, nor can it be.

## **Who am I?**

To understand why, a dash of philosophy is required! First of all, what exactly are we talking about? What exactly is a human being? Am I just the boss animal of the animal kingdom, or am I essentially something more?

I may have a body like the animals which has evolved just as theirs have, but there is more to me than my body. If that were not so, why are the apes not writing the kind of poetry Shakespeare wrote, or the kind of music Beethoven composed, or creating the like of Michelangelo's sculptures; why are the animals not in the space race or performing brain surgery in our hospitals?

I am radically different from the ape and every other animal because I am a *spiritual* being with a spiritual reasoning soul.

Because I have a spirit, I'm not simply an animal; and because I have a body, I'm not simply an angel. I am a *rational animal, an animal with a soul*. On the scale

of things, I am a creature midway between the animal kingdom and the choirs of angels.

If you take my spirit away from me, what's left is a corpse (which is not a human-being); if you take my body away from me, what's left is a spirit (which is not a human-being). I am neither a body nor a spirit. I am God's material-spiritual masterpiece, a rational, thinking, loving animal. For me to be me, I must be both, body and soul; body and spirit bonded together making one unique creature.

And if I am going to live forever with God, I want it to be me up there with Him, not an animal or an angel, but me, the unique human being that I am, soul and body bonded as one; otherwise, I lose my true identity for eternity!

I would, as well, be doing my body a real injustice were I to leave it behind forever. My body gets me to Heaven as well as my soul! It is on my head that the waters of Baptism flow; on my brow that Christ's sign is marked with holy chrism; it is my mouth that eats of the Bread of Life and drinks from the Chalice of Salvation; it is my ears that hear the Word of God and my hands and feet that carry out the great commandment of loving my neighbour as myself. It is largely through my body that I suffer pain in

communion with Christ my Crucified Lord. In other words, all God's graces come to me through my body. So, in all fairness to it, it cannot be left, like John Browne's, mouldering forever in the grave!

## **An Over-Crowded Heaven?**

And now to that other problem so many people have of an overcrowded Heaven. Here too we have to keep our philosophical train of thought chugging along.

We get a fair indication of how things will be with us in heaven, when the body rises again, from the characteristics of Christ's own risen Body. Lots of stories in the Gospels tell us of the disciples seeing the Risen Christ. Often, though, they didn't at first recognise him, like Mary Magdalene who thought initially he was the gardener! His Body had certainly changed, but it was still *his* Body. To prove this He showed his astonished disciples the marks of the nails and the spear. O yes, it was his Body all right, not a freshly created one, or a make-believe one (for he ate bread and fish before their eyes). It was his body but it had different qualities from those it had before: it could be in several places at once (while he was appearing to the apostles in the Upper Room he was also talking to the disciples on the road of Emmaus); He could enter rooms which were locked and barred.

Risen from the dead, Jesus shows that He is free of the former restraints on his body, the restraints caused by time and space. Why? Because, by rising from the dead, *He stepped out of time and space*. And so shall we!

There is no time in heaven, only God's eternal *now*; no one will have been in heaven two thousand years while his neighbour only two weeks. There is no space, no measurement of distance there either: there will be no difference between a meter and a trillion kilometres.

We cannot imagine this for the simple reason that from the moment we were conceived in the womb we have always been in time and place. The pumping of our mother's blood was like a ticking *time* piece to us; the womb a *cozy place* to be. We cannot imagine anything which is not in time and place for we have never experienced it. We can understand, but we cannot imagine, and there's no point in trying. The Pharisees put a trick question to Jesus about whose wife a woman would be in heaven who had been married to seven men. He simply said, in effect, "You're being silly; things are not like that up there". So, I believe in the resurrection of the body, because Christ told me so, because Christ Himself rose from

the dead, and because it makes sense logically and philosophically, but for the life of me, I cannot *imagine* it!

## **Seeing the Face of God**

Thus our Lord discourages us from speculating about heaven. But we do! Witness the images of harps and clouds and talk of reunions with grandma! One of the greatest tell-tale remarks indicating the shallowness of our understanding of heaven is the all too familiar comment at the time of death: “but she will be with her husband/child/parents now”. The image being conjured up here is one of blissful reunion in some quiet corner of heaven with God nowhere to be seen!

Indeed we shall be reunited with those we have loved, those *smiling angel faces which we have loved long since and lost awhile*, but infinitely more importantly, we shall be united with God, actually seeing Him face to face. We shall delight in Him in ways totally unimaginable to us now: as it is written: ‘*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived*’ – *the things God has prepared for those who love him*” (1 Cor 2:9).

God, Infinite Goodness and Love, will draw us to Himself like an almighty magnet, satisfying us

completely and perfecting us completely. *You have made us for yourself, O Lord*, said St Augustine, *and our hearts will find no rest till they rest in You*. We will be utterly riveted to Him, unable and unwilling to take our eyes off Him for a split second or turn our heart in any other direction. *What have I in heaven but You?* cries the Psalmist, *God is my possession forever*. ( Ps. 73:26)

So what about that reunion with our loved ones? Completely absorbed by the goodness and beauty of God and unable to tear our hearts away from the beatific vision of Him, we will see and love our loved ones in Him but not apart from Him. Purified, healed and perfected by his perfection, our love will be brought to its utter fulfilment and completion. We will love them as we have never been able to love them on earth, no matter how deep our love then was. Everything will share the perfection of God. Our relationships will be healed of all imperfection and raised to the very heights. Our joy will be complete. *Through Him and with Him and in Him...forever and ever.*

## 32. THE PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

So, having reflected on some of the key concepts of the Creed which we say Sunday by Sunday, we return now to our exploration of the liturgy of the Mass, continuing with the Bidding Prayers.

Are the *Bidding Prayers* (or the *Prayers of the Faithful*, as we should now call them) the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, or the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist? The dilemma is implied in this new, or rather very old, name we are now invited to use: *Prayers of the Faithful*.

Every congregation, equally in the early Church as in the Church of our own day, brings together the baptised (the Faithful), those preparing for Baptism (the Catechumens), and the unbaptised. But in the early Church, the unbaptised were not admitted in the first place and the Catechumens were dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word, for they, like the others, had not been initiated through Baptism into the Mystery of Faith which was about to be celebrated in the Eucharist. They were allowed to stay for the instructional part of the Mass (the readings and the

homily) because this formed part of their preparation for Baptism. But after the homily they were asked to leave. After they had gone with the congregation now consisting of the Faithful only, the *Prayers of the Faithful* were said. This is how these prayers got their ancient name and how they came to take their present position in the Mass.

As the form of the Mass developed in the course of the early centuries, the position of these prayers shifted about. At one time they were said at the very beginning of Mass and associated with the Penitential Rite. Their response at that time was *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy) and this is why the *Kyrie* is still to this day attached to the *Confiteor*. As the format of the Mass further developed in the Middle Ages, the Prayers of the Faithful dropped out all together, remaining only in the solemn liturgy of Good Friday. The Second Vatican Council reinstated them.

They are otherwise called the *Bidding Prayers* because of their form. The deacon or reader who leads them is not doing the praying himself but inviting the congregation to pray. Thus, their natural form is to begin with an invitation, *Let us...*, hence their name, from the old sense of the verb *to bid*, meaning to order or invite. The leader *bids* the faithful to pray for the needs of the Church and the world. The

important bit is the pause between the invitation and the response, for this is the moment when the congregation responds silently to the call to prayer and makes its petition to God.

The instruction of the Second Vatican Council was that these prayers should be very wide ranging, praying not just for the Church but for the needs of society too. The practice of saying the Hail Mary at the end of the Prayers of the Faithful is a local English observance, introduced to maintain that strong English devotion to Our Lady, which led to England being known for centuries as the *Dowry of Mary*.

So, do the Prayers of the Faithful end the Liturgy of the Word or begin the Liturgy of the Eucharist? It really doesn't matter much: they form a natural link anyway between the two. They comprehensively sum up in prayer the theme of the day, of the readings and of the homily, and thus fittingly prepare us for and launch us into the greatest prayer of all, the Eucharistic Prayer.

# PART THREE

## THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

### 33. A GENERAL VIEW OF THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The Liturgy of the Word which is now finished has not been simply a preparation for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, though it certainly serves that important purpose. Its primary objective is to nurture our souls with God's Living Word. As the sacred Body and Blood of Christ will nourish and strengthen us in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, so the Word of God nourishes and strengthens us in the Liturgy of the Word. The Mass is a table set with Word and Sacrament.

To launch ourselves into a general overview of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, let us reflect on a little modern-day simile. You give your wife a box of

chocolates because you love her. With smiles and thanks she takes it from you as she recognises the love behind it. Then she opens it and offers the box back to you, giving you the pick of the mix.

A simple but deficient parable, yet one that expresses essentially the thrust of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We offer a gift to God because we love Him and want to thank Him (*Presentation of the Gifts*); God accepts our gift and changes it (*Eucharistic Prayer*); then he gives it back to us offering us the Choicest Gift of all (*Rite of Holy Communion*).

Giving is almost always an expression of love and gratitude. In the Mass, as we exchange our gifts, the love and gratitude of mankind encounter the love and mercy of God in such a sublime way that only God Himself could have devised it.

## 34. PRESENTATION OF THE GIFTS

Apart from kissing it at the beginning of Mass and collecting the Gospel Book from it at the start of the Gospel Procession, the Priest has not yet been at the

Altar at all. The old *Tridentine Mass* (the Latin Mass many of us were brought up with) had the priest at the altar from beginning to end, even reading from there the Scriptures. This changed with the reforms of Vatican II. Now he goes to his chair (the *Sedelia*) after the initial kissing of the altar and remains there throughout the Liturgy of the Word; only now at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist does he move to the altar.

The physical position of the priest therefore clearly indicates which of the two main parts of the Mass is being celebrated. The Liturgy of the Word centres on the Lectern; the Liturgy of the Eucharist, on the Altar. Only when the Liturgy of the Eucharist is over does the priest return to the chair for the concluding rites.

The Celebrant (priest/bishop) now goes to the Altar to present the gifts of bread and wine to God. This part of the Mass used to be called the *Offertory*; the preferred term today is the *Presentation of the Gifts*. It is a kind of setting aside of the bread and wine for divine worship, separating them from ordinary use. As the priest presents first the unleavened bread then the wine, the prayers he says are the prayers which (with slight adaptations) Our Lord himself would have used at the Last Supper as he blessed the bread and wine. This is the first pointer to what we will discuss later,

that the Mass *is* the Last Supper now being made present under the form of Sacrament.

Both prayers are the same: *Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread (wine) we offer you, fruit of the earth (of the vine) and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life (our spiritual drink).*

### ***Everything is God's Gift***

The 2011 translation of these prayers brings out something the previous version obscured, that the gift we offer God is something God has already given us: *through your goodness we have received the bread (wine) we offer you.*

This simple phrase should serve as a consistent reminder to us that everything we are and have is God's gift. Every situation and circumstance, every person or material thing we live among, every thought in our minds or the love in our hearts owes its existence to God and the loving kindness of God. Our very being comes from Him; without Him we simply wouldn't be, nor would any situation in which we find ourselves. Our whole selves and our whole world are pure gift: we are utterly dependent.

### **Offering our daily work to God**

A whole production line of people stands behind the tiny piece of bread on the paten (the sower, the farmer, the miller, the baker, the retailer etc); equally numerous are the people involved in the production and shipping of the wine in the chalice. With the words *the work of human hands* the prayer remembers and includes them all. But more: the offering of this *work of human hands* includes the work of our own hands too. In the Mass we offer ourselves to the Father along with the work we do, for the work we do is an essential part of who we are.

## **The Collection**

Our non-Catholic visitors, whose traditional time for a collection is during a final hymn, are often surprised that a monetary collection is taken up at this point in the Mass. But it is this reference to our work and this opportunity to offer our work to God that accounts for it. Our own pay, the just exchange for the work we have done, is the source of this gift we are now making. Not just the bread and wine, therefore, are the work of human hands, but also all that results from our work, including the church and the priest and the parish as well. With the parishioners' financial support, exercised mainly in the offertory, the church stands, the priest lives and the parish forms.

The collection, therefore, is not a grubby materialistic intrusion into the sacred mysteries being celebrated; it expresses *the work of human hands*, the generosity of the human heart, the gift of ourselves to God and our resolve that the Church should prosper, the Gospel be preached, the Mass celebrated and the poor cared for.

## **The Watered Wine**

Before offering the wine, the priest adds to it a drop of water. This is a good example of how things continue in the Church's tradition. Water has always been added to the wine at Mass for the simple reason that Our Lord himself used watered wine at the Last Supper; it was the Jewish custom.

Just a drop of water into the wine, and as you look, for a brief instant you can actually see the water and wine mingling. In that moment, the drop of water ceases to be water and becomes wine; it takes on a nature it did not have before. It points to the change which will come over the gifts in the course of the Eucharistic Prayer: they too will take on a nature they did not have before and, true to purpose, will transform us as well. As the priest watches the drop of water take on the nature of the wine, he prays: *By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity*

*of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*

## **Washing his Hands and the Offertory Procession**

While praying that the Lord may cleanse him of his sins, the priest washes his hands after he has offered the wine. The real reason behind this little ritual is that in the early Church, when people were often paid in kind rather than money, they would bring up their gifts for the upkeep of the priest and parish and for the needs of the local poor and homeless. After receiving these gifts (chickens, milk, potatoes, fuel...) the priest needed to cleanse his hands before proceeding with the Mass. This accounts not only for the present-day ritual washing but also for the *Offertory Procession*.

Where the faithful once brought provisions in kind for the upkeep of priest and parish, today the Offertory Procession brings up the gifts of bread and wine and the collection. In many parishes these days, the old tradition is being revived, as gifts for the poor and

homeless are brought to the altar as well. But the collection is the same - gift in cash rather than kind.

## 35. THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE PEOPLE

The priest then addresses the Congregation: *Pray my sisters and brothers that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.*

To which they reply: *May the Lord receive the Sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his Holy Church.*

*My sacrifice and yours!* - a clumsy expression, one we wouldn't use in everyday speech: so why doesn't the priest simply say *our* sacrifice? There must be grounds for it and there most certainly are. Do you remember the discussion we had in Chapter 3 on why we say *and with your spirit* instead of the more natural *and also with you*? Well, it's basically the very same reason.

Understanding why *mine and yours* is used instead of *ours* gives us a keen insight into the key rôle we ourselves play in the celebration of Holy Mass. It also tells us a lot about our own status as lay Christians.

A significant teaching of the Second Vatican council, one which we seldom, if ever, give thought or attention to, spells out the important doctrine of the ***common priesthood of the laity***.

In paragraph 10 of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, we read: *Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, **made a kingdom and priests to God his Father out of this new people** (the Church). *The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house **and a holy priesthood**.**

Baptism makes all of us priests!

But there is really only one Priesthood - the Priesthood of Christ; we, clergy or laypeople, are proud sharers in that one Priesthood.

When we come to consider the Memorial Prayer in Chapter 45, we shall see how this gift of priesthood operates critically in the context of the Mass, and how

it empowers all of us, priest and people alike, to do something unimaginably wonderful.

The Council makes it clear that the sharing in Christ's Priesthood which is conferred on us in the Sacrament of Baptism is not the same as that of the *ministerial* priesthood (the Pope, Bishops and Priests).

The very use of the word *ministerial priesthood* gives us a clue to the difference. Before the radical rethinking that occurred in Vatican II, there was a kind of *us and them* attitude in the Church - the *us* being the Clergy and the *them* being the laity. The priest was up there in the sanctuary, the people down there in the pews; the priest giving out, the laity taking in; the priest in boss mode, the people in workers' mode. And we took it all for granted!

But the Council turned this false perception on its head. It focussed, rather, on the dignity, the leadership qualities, the missionary capabilities. and the *royal priesthood* of all the baptised. It made it abundantly clear that priest and people *together* are the People of God, the Church, and that the Clergy are the servants of this Holy People in the Household of God. Henceforth the Clergy would be designated as the *ministerial priesthood*, there *to serve not to be served*, just as Christ was.

The grace of the ministerial priesthood furnishes the Church with members who are equipped with the spiritual power and authority to lead, teach and sanctify, to celebrate the Holy Mass and the Sacraments. These spiritual gifts and powers are specifically given by God *for the sake of the people*, not primarily for the sake of the priest himself. He too is dependent on the ministerial priesthood for his own needs just as everyone else is.

The Council teaches how the priesthood of the laity and that of the Clergy are interrelated: *Though they differ from each other in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them, in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. For their part, the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by reason of their royal priesthood. They likewise exercise that priesthood by receiving the Sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity. (ibid).*

### **Prayer over the Gifts**

The celebrant goes on to say the *Prayer over the Gifts*. This, like the *Opening Prayer (the Collect)*, is *proper*,

that is to say, it changes according to feast or season. It asks God to be pleased with and to accept the gifts we are offering and, in doing so, it closes the first part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

## 36. INCENSE

In some churches, depending on the local custom, immediately the gifts have been offered to God and thus set aside for divine worship they are blessed with incense. Incense is used for the blessing of the altar at the beginning of Mass; at the reading of the Gospel; at the Presentation of the Gifts and at the elevation of the consecrated Sacrament.

You will notice that in the Church's tradition incense is used for people *and* things, though "things" is perhaps an inappropriate word to use since it includes the Blessed Sacrament itself!

The Altar is incensed, so is the Gospel Book and the newly consecrated Host and Chalice; likewise the priest, the deacon and the members of the congregation. But why these, what have they all in

common? The Presentation of the Gifts gives us the clue.

### ***Set-apartness is the essence of holiness***

In the last chapter we tried to show that the inner meaning of the Presentation of the Gifts is a kind of setting them apart for the worship of God. And everyone and everything incensed at Mass have this in common: they have all been set apart, designated, consecrated, for the worship of God, including every single member of the congregation, through their Baptism and Confirmation

God is ultimately the *Set Apart One*. In theological language He is *transcendent*. He is utterly beyond us, beyond our imagining; infinite and eternal. This transcendence of God, this set-apartness is the essence of his holiness. He is the Holy One because he is utterly different.

The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) well understood this, and so for them holiness was a distinctive and unique quality of God: He alone is the Holy One. The only way anyone or anything could become holy was through contact with Him. The ancient Jewish People saw this quality as somehow

infectious; anyone or anything that had close contact with Him would catch it, would become holy too; so the priests were holy, the temple holy, the Sabbath holy, the land holy. This old Jewish notion has persisted in the Church: we Christians who enjoy such unique communion with God are seen by the Church as somehow holy, somehow set apart from the world. The Fathers of the Church spoke of the Christian as *being in the world but not of the world*. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:14).

Everyone knows that Fred there, lying in his coffin before the altar, was one of the biggest blackguards in the parish, yet here he is being solemnly incensed by the Church at the end of his Requiem Mass. Why? Because sometime in his life, not least through the initial and consecrating sacrament of Baptism, Fred has been in direct contact with the Holy One. Despite his later behaviour, he has been infected by the holiness of God.

### **Prayer ascending like Incense**

Frequently in the Scriptures there is reference to prayer ascending to God like pleasing fragrant incense. Thus: *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer,*

*with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand (Revelation 8:3). And the Psalmist prays: May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice (Psalm 141:2).*

The above reference from the book of Revelation is to the heavenly Altar of Incense which, in earthly mode, stood in the Temple before the Holy of Holies. It was there that the priests, and only the priests on God's strictest orders, offered incense to God after both the morning and the evening sacrifices. The Jewish Rabbis taught that the offering of the incense pleased God more than any other sacrifice.

## **The Use of Incense in the History of the Mass**

Though incense has been used in pagan worship for thousands upon thousands of years, the Church takes the use of incense, like so many of its other rituals, from the practice of the Jews. The introduction of incense into the Mass was comparatively late. It took several hundred years before we hear of it; there is no mention of incense in the Mass before the fifth century. The incensation of the Book of the Gospels was the first usage to appear; the incensation of the

Gifts, of which we have just been speaking, was not introduced into the Liturgy until as late as the eleventh century.

## **Incense in our Genes**

It is interesting to see how popular incense has latterly become in a society which has lost so much of its sense of God, though the original use of incense was always associated with the divine. Today, incense sticks of all descriptions are available in every corner shop and supermarket and when I googled *incense stick* I got some three and a quarter million references! Maybe there is something subliminal here; something in our subconscious, in our genes that is activated by the heady scent of incense, bringing us back to that natural and instinctive awareness of God imprinted on our nature and to that innate need we have to worship Him. Maybe this expanding use of incense in the home will rekindle this awareness of God and bring people back to where incense has its full and most explicit meaning.

## **37. THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER**

We have now reached the heart of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer. This is where the great Sacrament

of the Eucharist is celebrated; here the Sacred Mysteries become a divine reality in our very midst. In this chapter I want to speak about the Eucharistic Prayer generally, especially about its format, and in later chapters to focus on its individual parts.

### **A Map of the Eucharistic Prayer.**

In one way, all the Eucharistic Prayers are the same; they have the same line of thought running through them like several maps showing the streets of the same town. Taking this image a little further, let us imagine being on the upper deck of a local bus. Maybe today, as the bus trundles through the town, you are looking for some nice place to celebrate your wife's birthday, so your eyes are focusing on the restaurants; maybe you are thinking of taking a bit of exercise, so your attention is on the parks; or maybe it's the shops you are interested in, or the pubs, or the art galleries. Each time you are following the same route, but your focus of attention is on some particular feature.

It is exactly thus with the Eucharistic Prayers. They all follow precisely the same route, prayer after prayer, but the focus varies, each Eucharistic Prayer bringing to the fore some different aspect of God's salvation.

It is important to understand the route the bus is taking: where it starts from, via which streets it goes, and where it ultimately ends up. In the following chapters I shall try to follow the route of the Eucharistic Prayer, explaining how each prayer follows from its predecessor and leads to the next, street by street as it were. But I shall leave you to work out for yourself what each individual Eucharistic Prayer is focusing on as it does the rounds of the City of God!

## **Dom Bernard Botte OSB**

Today there are several Eucharistic Prayers; before the Council there was only one. That one we now know as *Eucharist Prayer One* or the *Roman Canon*. It is the only one that doesn't fit what I have just been saying about the bus route. It's got its own itinerary! It visits all the same sites as the others do, but goes its own sweet way!

The reason for this is that Eucharistic Prayer One, while very old, is not the oldest. It was in use in ancient Rome (from where it gets its name, the *Roman*

*Canon*) but other Eucharistic Prayers had been in use before it, mainly in the East.

One of these more ancient Eucharistic Prayers was found quoted in full in the writings of St Hypolitus of Rome (170-235) who insists that he did not composed it himself but that it originates from an even earlier period.

The liturgists of the Church, who pay careful and learned attention to these very ancient prayers, were in top gear around the time of the Second Vatican Council. The Eucharistic Prayer found in the writings of St Hypolitus was put under the liturgical microscope, studied in detail, modified and shortened. The person most closely associated with this very important work was a famous French Benedictine by the name of Dom Bernard Botte.

This modified Eucharistic Prayer, which we know now as *Eucharistic Prayer Two*, became the pattern for all subsequent Eucharistic Prayers composed after the Council; hence the reason why they all have exactly the same outline or map, as we said. As well as the four Eucharistic Prayers we are very familiar with, several others have been created, some for general use, some for use with children, some for special times like Advent and Lent. And as the years

go by, more no doubt will be composed. But all these Eucharistic Prayers, with the exception of Eucharistic Prayer One, either have followed or will follow the same pattern, the same route as Eucharistic Prayer Two, the prayer found in the writing of St Hypolitus and adapted by Dom Botte.

So, for the rest of this treatment of the Eucharistic Prayers, I shall comment on the text of Eucharistic Prayer Two, leaving you to see how all the others match it, prayer for prayer, idea for idea, but each one expressing in its own individuality the one great Mystery of Faith.

## 38. PREFACE

I still have the missal given me when I was ten, rather battered now but much loved. In those early days, and to be honest for many further years, I couldn't understand why the Preface of the Mass came right in the middle and not at the very beginning, like any other preface I had ever come across.

We call it the *Preface of the Mass*, but it is really the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, which it introduces. I am often tempted to, and very often do, skip the

preface of a book in my eagerness to get stuck into it, but to pay scant attention to the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer would be a considerable loss.

It is preceded by a dialogue between Priest and People:

*The Lord be with you. / And with your Spirit.  
Lift up your hearts. / We lift them up to the Lord.  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. / It is right  
and just.*

This dialogue is very ancient; in fact, apart from the words of Our Lord quoted at the Consecration, it is the oldest part of the Mass, dating back at least to the second century. It introduced the Eucharistic Prayer of St Hypolitus of Rome, of which we spoke earlier. And the overarching theme it sets for the rest of the Eucharistic Prayer is that of thanksgiving. The word *Eucharist* means *Thanksgiving*.

**The Preface falls into three parts.**

*First*, it takes up this theme of thanksgiving: *It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Father most holy, through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ.* This is how the Second Eucharistic Prayer puts it, but every

Preface begins with these or similar words: that it is right and just to give God thanks, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, in every season and in any and every situation we may find ourselves in - in thick and thin.

As I said earlier, the sentiments expressed here of thanking God for every conceivable circumstance were, in my opinion, the secret behind St Paul's fulfilled life and heroic martyrdom and probably the secret of every saint that has ever lived. Its constant repetition at Mass is a useful reminder to us of an attitude of mind we must constantly strive after, an attitude that has the power to refashion our own minds to reflect the heroic soul of St Paul, who said *I wish that all of you were as I am* (1 Cor 7:7).

The **second** part of the Preface faces the fact that it is utterly impossible to thank God in words for *all* the benefits He has given us. The Preface, therefore, zooms in at this point onto the particular feast or season that is being currently celebrated and gives particular thanks for that. It could thank God for the joyful expectation of Christ's coming, as in Advent; his Incarnation at Christmas; his Resurrection, at Eastertide; for the Holy Spirit, at Whitsuntide; for the various graces bestowed on Our Lady; for the life of a saint, a virgin, martyr or missionary.

In other words, there are dozens of Prefaces each specialising in thanking God for a particular season or saint and focusing the thanksgiving of the Mass on that particular dimension of the vastness of all that God has done for us and achieved in us.

The *third* section of the Preface is an invitation to the Angels and Saints of heaven to join us in the praise of God, or, to put it another way, a declaration that we are joining them in their eternal hymn of thanksgiving. It reminds us that the seemingly half empty church is in reality filled with countless Angels and Saints. They appreciate, in a way that we can never now appreciate, that the Eucharist is the making present of the Lord's Death and Resurrection (as we shall later see) and from such an event nothing but nothing could keep them away.

## 39. THE SANCTUS

Responding to the invitation at the close of the Preface we say the Sanctus:

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.*

*Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.*

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.*

About 2,750 years ago, a holy man was sitting in the recently rebuilt Temple at Jerusalem, minding his own business and saying his prayers. His eyes were directed towards the Holy of Holies, while his mind was on the things of heaven. As he gazed, it seemed to him that the whole scene slowly melted away before his very eyes and instead of the temple lately built by King Jehoash, he found himself gazing into the heavenly temple itself, of which the edifice at Jerusalem was only a very inadequate copy. We are privileged to have his very own description of what he saw: *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.* (Isaiah 6:1-4)

As we come to this part of the Mass, we too are in God's earthly temple saying our prayers. Isaiah saw only a vision of heaven, but for us heaven itself is

about to open up and invite us in. Heaven is no other than where God is, and the Mass is about to make that presence a sacramental reality in our midst. As heaven opens before us, we are invited to join our glad voices to that unending hymn, sung by the Seraphim, which Isaiah first listened to in awesome wonderment.

Even if our choiring is not so brilliant and, as most Catholics, we fear to open our mouths too wide or to turn up the volume, we can nevertheless be assured that the doorposts and thresholds of our church are shaking and the temple is filled with smoke - because God is there, with his eternally and perfectly rehearsed Choir of Angels!

*Filled with smoke?* Clouds in the Scriptures are always symbolic of the presence of God; He appeared as a pillar of cloud in the desert as He led his people to the Promised Land; He was shrouded in cloud as He gave the Law and Covenant to his People on Mount Sinai; God enveloped Jesus and his companions in a cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration; and the last sight the disciples had of Christ was before a cloud finally hid him from their sight. The clouds of incense still hanging on the still atmosphere of the church after the incensation at the Offertory serve to remind us of this divine presence

filling our human space. As Isaiah said: *I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

## **Hosanna in the Highest**

At this point in the Mass, as Heaven opens before us, we are poised to enter the Holy of Holies, the New Jerusalem.

The second part of the Sanctus are the words of the exulting crowd as they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, the first day of that week in which our salvation would be won. *And the crowds that went before him and those which followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest"*(Mt.21.9). We repeat their excited cries.

The rejoicing crowd entered with Jesus into the Holy City, the Old Jerusalem; we are entering with Him into that Holy City now made New by his Paschal Mystery, that New Jerusalem of which Isaiah was allowed only a glimpse.

Within that one week, Jesus celebrated his Last Supper, was crucified and rose again victoriously. We call this the great *Paschal Mystery*. The Mass, as we

shall see later, literally makes this Paschal Mystery a living reality in which we ourselves are now involved: we enter the City with Him waving our palm branches; we sit at supper with Him; we stand with Him beneath the Cross in company with Our Lady; we witness his Resurrection. No wonder we cry out *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*.

### **Hosanna in the Highest.**

Do we ever stop to think what we mean when we cry out *Hosanna*? The Palm Sunday crowds used it spontaneously because it was a Hebrew word found often in their own liturgy and prayers. It is a cry for salvation meaning *save us now* or *save us, please*. It is a pleading for immediate salvation but at the same time a joyful shout recognizing that salvation is already present.

As we enter the Holy City with Christ at this part of the Mass, we too are crying out *Hosanna, save us now*. We recognise that the Mass is God's great salvation making present the Paschal Mystery in its fullness. We need that salvation still, but we are conscious that we have already received it. The Hosannas we cry are both passionately pleading and gratefully praising.

The Sanctus, therefore, prepares us for the Eucharistic Prayer: it harks back to the presence of the Angel Hosts surrounding the God who now comes to us in Sacrament and whom Isaiah saw in vision; it reminds us of what Christ has achieved for us in his Paschal Mystery; and it puts us into that joyful frame of mind which the crowds showed when they accompanied Jesus into the Holy City.

## 40. PRAYER OF PRAISE

With our Saviour and praising Him with our Hosannas, we now enter, sacramentally and actually, the Holy City, the celestial New Jerusalem, as we begin the Eucharistic Prayer proper. The praise of the Sanctus, with its emphasis on the Holiness of God, carries over into the opening words of all the Eucharistic Prayers.

The Second Eucharistic Prayer, somewhat abruptly, begins: *You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness.*

### **The Meaning of Praise**

Because the praise of God is the essence of all prayer, it is not surprising that praise opens every Eucharistic Prayer. But what exactly do we mean by the word *praise* and why does God expect it of us?

In our English language, there is close affinity between the words *praise* and *prize*, and this kinship between the two can help us understand better the meaning of the word *praise*. Both words come to us from a common root, and so essentially have a common meaning.

A prize is something we would greatly value, be prepared to struggle for, yearn to possess. And when we say we prize something, we mean we value it extremely highly. Scripture tells us that God is the One whom we must prize above all, the Prize for whom we must run the race of life. *I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus* (Phil 3:14).

What we prize we spontaneously praise, *for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of* says Our Lord (Mt. 12:34). Because we prize God we praise Him. If we didn't prize Him we wouldn't praise Him. The sincerity, the depth, the frequency of our praise of God expresses how much we value Him, his love, his creation, his salvation, and all the benefits He has

given us. The praise we give God, or fail to give Him, is a gauge of our true priorities in life.

## **Praise is Remembering**

Praising God means essentially remembering who He is and what He has done for us. Many of the Psalms just spend their time remembering the wonders the Lord had done for his Chosen People; they tell the same story over and over again. Likewise, the essence of the Rosary is remembering, as it were from Our Lady's perspective, the wonders of the Lord's life, death and resurrection.

The Mass, as we shall see later, is remembering these same wonders but in an utterly unique way; it is, as we shall see, a kind of entering into God's own Memory. We shall discuss later how the Memorial of the Lord holds the key to the essential understanding of what the Mass is.

## **Praising God's Holiness**

So, the opening prayer of each of the Eucharistic Prayers is a tribute of praise. The angels Isaiah saw in vision were praising his holiness first and foremost: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty* – that quality of God which separates him from all else, puts Him

utterly beyond every created thing, his supreme transcendence, the very essence of his Being. So, taking up the song of the angels, every Eucharistic Prayer begins by *praise to the Holiest in the Height*.

## 41. THE EPICLESIS

The following prayer is called the *Epiclesis* which is a Greek word meaning *Invocation*. It being Greek and not Latin is significant. As I have already noted, the East is still where mystery and mystical experiences are sought and found; and there is good reason.

### **The Working of the Holy Spirit**

Like the Celts, who some historians say came from there, the peoples of the East have a very different mentality from the peoples of the West. While the western mind, dominated by the culture inherited from the Romans, is very matter of fact, very legalistic, the Eastern mind is more spiritually inclined. This differing mentality has influenced the ways in which the Church in the East and in the West has developed, before as well as after the split with the Orthodox.

The Eucharistic Prayers of the early church mainly emanated from the East and were full of reference to the Holy Spirit. Compare them with the Roman Canon and the difference is amazing. In fact, the Roman Canon only mentions the Holy Spirit once by name, and that in the doxology, its very last sentence. This doesn't mean that it ignores the Holy Spirit; Eucharistic Prayer One has multiple references to blessings, all of which imply the activity of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the lack of explicit reference to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity is very remarkable, while the East's fascination with the Holy Spirit is equally striking.

Apart from the actual words of Our Lord at the Consecration, the Epiclesis is the most important prayer in the Mass. As the central invocation of the Holy Spirit, it follows directly and naturally from the Prayer of Praise, whose theme, as we have seen, is God's holiness.

God's Holiness is not a quality of God; it *is* God. The little old lady at the back of the church is doubtlessly holy; but this is a quality she has acquired, a quality that has grown and developed. God's Holiness is not like that. In *Holy Spirit*, the word *Holy* is not a

descriptive word, as it is with the little old lady, it is exactly what the Spirit is. He *is* Holiness.

It was because the Holy Spirit came down upon Mary that she conceived the Holy One of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. The angel answered, *The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God* (Luke 1:35).

Christ is the Holy One of God, and wherever the Holy Spirit is, Christ is made present. The Holy Spirit came down upon us at Baptism, and Christ was born within us, we became Christian, members of his very Body the Church. When confirmed, it is the Holy Spirit who completes that baptismal presence of Christ. When the Bishop lays his hands on the head of the Deacon at his ordination, the Holy Spirit makes him a Priest sharing in Christ's own unique priesthood. The same is true with the ordination of a bishop, where the sharing in Christ's Priesthood is made total. So, true to form, when the Holy Spirit is invoked in the Mass, it is Christ who becomes present.

## **The Epiclesis**

Continuing to take Eucharistic Prayer Two as our guide, here is its Epiclesis:

*Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall, so that they may become + for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

As the Priest says this prayer, he first spreads his hands over the bread and wine then blesses them with the Sign of the Cross. The *laying on of hands*, as occurs in Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, the Sacrament of the Sick and Ordination, is the traditional gesture when the Church confers the Holy Spirit, as witnessed to frequently in the Acts of the Apostles. In our Western tradition, the bell rings at this point of the Mass to awaken us to the importance of what is happening.

### **What is the Moment when Christ actually becomes present in the Mass?**

A question which has been asked for centuries: which prayer makes Christ present in the Mass? Is it the Epiclesis or the Words of Our Lord at the Last Supper? The Catechism's answer is both: *At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood.*

However, the Council of Florence in 1439, referring

to the words of Our Lord at the Last Supper, declared that these divine words of the Saviour have all the power of transubstantiation.

But to enquire about the exact moment Christ becomes present is not helpful. The Eastern Orthodox Churches put the Epiclesis after the Words of Our Lord at the Last Supper; the Western tradition puts it before them. The Church's response is that the whole of the Eucharistic Prayer itself is consecratory; it is the Eucharist Prayer as such that effects transubstantiation. This is why a priest cannot consecrate the contents of a baker's shop simply by saying the words of consecration, as some Protestants mockingly have inferred.

The Catholic Church has learned from the East to recognise in the Mass, far more than it ever used to, the presence, activity and essential role of the Holy Spirit.

## 42. THE WORDS OF INSTITUTION

The Epiclesis and the words of Our Lord at the Last Supper lie at the heart of the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Here are Christ's words as they appear, with varying introductions, in every Eucharistic Prayer:

*At the time he was betrayed and entered willingly into his Passion, he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body which will be given up for you.*

*In a similar way, when supper was ended, he took the chalice and, once more giving thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.*

## **The Institution of the Mass**

By these concluding words, *Do this in memory of me*, Our Lord commands the Apostles, and through them the Church, to do what He had done, and by so commanding, he institutes the Sacrament of the Eucharist. For this reason, Our Lord's words at the Last Supper are often referred to as the *Words of*

*Institution.* The Apostles obeyed their divine Master, and from the earliest days of the Church the Mass was celebrated by the solemn repetition of these sacred words over bread and wine. As they appear in the Mass, the Words of Institution are a narrative, telling what happened at the Last Supper, and also a prayer, addressed to the Father.

### **Taking, thanking, breaking and giving**

The introductory words, *he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples* became a kind of code indicating the Eucharist. We hear them repeatedly throughout the rest of the New Testament: when, for example, Our Lord sits at table and begins supper with the two disciples whom He had met on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30) : *when he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them*; or when He appears to his disciples on the beach, having cooked their breakfast, *Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them.* (John 21:1)

*Taking, thanking, breaking and giving* are all words that apply also to us as the Lord's disciples. As He takes the bread, so He takes us in his sacred hands and upholds us; as he gives thanks and says the blessing over the bread, he gives thanks to his Father for giving

us to him as his disciples (John 10:29); as he breaks the bread, so He breaks us too, often through pain and suffering, to transform us into the persons he wants us to be; then, when we are sufficiently changed into his own blessed likeness, as the bread is changed in the Mass, He gives us to others as witnesses to Himself, as He gave the Apostles to the world.

### **Given up for you...poured out for you**

What is essential for us to notice here is that Our Lord did not simply say, This is my Body, but adds immediately, *which will be given up for you*. The same with the words referring to his Precious Blood: at once he adds, *which will be poured out for you*. These words introduce the idea of sacrifice.

How the Mass is a Sacrifice we will discuss later on, but here it is necessary to recognise that the Body and Blood which are being made present in the Eucharist are the Body and Blood of the Crucified Christ.

### **Examination of the Words over the Chalice: This is the...Blood of the...Covenant**

The word *Covenant* is much beloved by the Bible, appearing 332 times throughout. Why it is used so frequently is because it sums up in one word what the

whole of the Scriptures are about: the establishment of a special relationship between God and his People. The word means a contract or formal agreement between two or more parties. In the Bible it refers especially to this agreement between God and his People whereby, if they keep their part by obeying his commands and ordinances, he will be their God and they will be his People. In the Old Testament God makes covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses. In the New Testament, Christ makes a New Covenant with us, that He would be our God and we his New People. And He does this by the shedding of his Precious Blood.

## **Blood Rites**

Ancient blood rites also give us an insight into why Christ shed his precious Blood for us on the Cross and why He made his once-and-for-all Sacrifice on the Cross an on-going sacramental reality in the Eucharist.

Only relatively recently have we come to understand the vital importance of blood in human and animal systems. The circulation of the blood was only discovered in 1615 by William Harvey and only much more recently have we come to understand its complexity and the role it plays in the body; and we

are still learning. But since the earliest of times, with little understanding as to its real purpose, man has sensed the altogether special importance of blood as the life-giving element in both man and beast. For this reason, blood was seen as something sacred and precious, and all across the ancient world, from northernmost Europe through Asia and Africa and even in the southern hemisphere, there were practised what came to be known as *blood rites*. Men would cut themselves and rub the open wound against the wound of the other, thus sharing blood and signalling a unity, a brotherhood, a permanent friendship forged between them. For the same reason, they would sometimes bleed themselves, each pouring his blood into a communal cup, and, mingling it with wine, would drink of it. In the light of this widespread mentality and practice, we can see that Christ was making it clear that by sharing his sacred Meal his followers would literally become his blood brothers and sisters.

The rite of circumcision, which God imposed on the Israelites, was itself a kind of blood rite. This shedding of blood, in obedience to God's command to Abraham, was a solemn covenant with God, while this mark in the flesh served as a constant reminder of this covenant. It was to express God's special relationship with Abraham and his descendants that He initiated this rite of circumcision.

Another account of a blood rite found in the Old Testament is when Moses, accepting the Law as given him on Sinai, seals the Covenant by sacrificing a bull.

Let us examine this passage of Scripture carefully, for it has close associations with what exactly Christ was doing when He instituted the Blessed Eucharist. *He (Moses) got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words (Exodus 24: 4-8)*

Moses splashes the bull's blood over the altar, which represented God, and over the People. God and the People are joined in blood, and the Covenant is sealed in blood. Moses reads the Book of the Covenant to

the people. They respond, *We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.* In return for Yahweh being their God and as their part in the covenant, the People promise to observe the Law

## **The New Covenant**

*This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words* says Moses as he sprinkles the blood on the People. The words *this is the blood of the Covenant*, would have been very familiar indeed to the Apostles, who would have heard this passage read time after time in synagogue. Now, at the Last Supper, they hear Jesus say, *this is my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant.* They would have noticed immediately the additional words: *my, new, eternal.*

*Testament* is an alternative word for *Covenant* and we are very familiar with its use in the division of the two parts of the Bible into Old and New Testaments. By calling the latter part of the Bible the New Testament, we are acknowledging that Jesus introduced a *new covenant*, a new testament, between God and his People. Christ's Covenant is something altogether new, marvellously surpassing the old one which was sealed with the sprinkled blood of a bull. Here is a covenant between God and his People sealed with

nothing less than the Blood, shed in pure love, of Jesus Christ, God's only begotten and eternal Son. The Eucharist celebrates this New Covenant, this new and wondrous relationship between God and his People.

The Old Covenant was between God and the Jewish People alone; the New Covenant is between God and his New People, the Church, embracing men and women of every race without exception.

The Church was born of Jewish stock and her most earnest desire is that the Jewish People would let their ancient covenants with God come to their intended fullness and perfection in Christ.

### **The Eternal Covenant.**

Christ's Covenant is eternal. It is a covenant between God and his People, the Church, a covenant which will stand for ever. Into eternity we will remain sealed by this Covenant, children of the Father, brothers and sisters of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, our wrongdoings forever cleansed by the Blood that has been poured out for the forgiveness of sins, and members of that eternal Communion of Saints, bonded to God and to one another as blood brothers and sisters, who have drunk the Precious Blood of the

Son of God. Jesus said to them, *Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day* (John 6:53-54).

## 43. MY BODY...MY BLOOD

In an earlier chapter, we said that the words of Our Lord, *Do this in memory of me*, give us the key to understanding the Mass. And they most certainly do.

We have also observed that these words established the Mass in the Church, in that they commanded the Apostles to repeat what Jesus had just done, defining at the same time the Christian Priesthood which the Apostles were inheriting, as we have already considered.

### **What *had* Christ just done?**

He had declared that the bread before Him, the wine before Him, were no longer bread and wine, but his precious Body and Blood.

Theologians try to explain the change in subtle philosophical language, an effort which culminated in the coining of the word *Transubstantiation*, literally meaning *a change of substance*. But the theologians were not using substance in its everyday meaning but in a very precise sense which the ancient Greek philosophers had given it, as we discussed when investigating the meaning of *consubstantial* in the Creed.

There is little point in worrying our heads about this; we can never really understand it anyway. It is the great Mystery of Faith. The eminent theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, puts it simply in his famous hymn '*Adoro Te Devote*' : *What God's Son has told me take for truth I do, / Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.*

The simpler the approach we take to this, the better. What I say to the children I say also to myself and suggest to you: after the consecration, the sacred elements continue to look like bread and wine, continue to taste like bread and wine, smell like bread and wine, break and pour like bread and wine, behave in every physical way as bread and wine, BUT THEY

ARE NO LONGER BREAD AND WINE. What they are has changed.

The WHAT in that last sentence is very near to what the philosophers and theologians mean by *substance* in the word *transubstantiation*. WHAT it is has changed: it is not bread but the Body of Christ; it is not wine, but the Blood of Christ, despite all appearances to the contrary. And this change is effected by the power of the Holy Spirit, called down on the bread and wine at the Epiclesis, and by the power of Jesus' words.

So what did Christ do at the Last Supper? He changed bread and wine into his own Body and Blood.

So what do we have before us on the Altar or in the Tabernacle? Jesus just sitting there?

There was a story that did the rounds of the Clergy at the time of the Council. An English Bishop who was acutely aware of his episcopal dignity and who insisted on being address as 'My Lord' had great devotion to the Eucharist and to the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle. Each night before retiring to bed he would tap on the tabernacle door in his private chapel

and say, ‘Good Night Jesus’. One night he got a reply, ‘Good Night, my Lord’.

Is that our idea too of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist? Just sitting there, statically awaiting our attention? Or is there something else?

## 44. THE MEMORIAL

**Jesus said: *do this in memory of me/as a memorial of me.***

The Jews had a very different understanding of *memorial* from ourselves. For us, it is a stone monument or a brass plaque; for the Jews, it was *something living, something still very much alive - a feast.*

Moses had ordered that the Exodus from Egypt (God’s central act of salvation in the Old Testament) should be commemorated annually and at the same time of year as it actually occurred. Moses prescribed that this commemoration, this *Memorial*, should take the form of a celebratory feast (cf. Leviticus 23:5-8).

[In the Hebrew calendar, Passover occurs on the 14th of Nisan. Nisan is the first month of spring in the northern hemisphere, with a full moon on its 14th day. In our calendar, this is close to the Spring Equinox, 21 March. This explains why our Easter is a variable feast.]

When the Jews thereafter celebrated this Pascal Meal, the *Passover Meal*, they celebrated not only the fact of the historic Exodus *but also its lasting effects*. They celebrated their continuing freedom from Egyptian slavery; they celebrated that they had become and still were God's covenanted People.

## **The Christian Memoriala**

It is highly significant, therefore, that Jesus established the Eucharist at the very celebration of the Passover Meal. He was bringing this biblical celebration of the Passover to its total fulfilment, just as He brings to completion everything else in the Old Testament, as he promised He would in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17).

So, in his bringing the Passover Meal to its fulfilment, He keeps the meal; he keeps the remembrance and thanksgiving for salvation and for freedom, but he raises everything to a higher plain. From now on, his

disciples would continue to thank God for all that He did for the Jewish People at the Passover and throughout their history: but now there is an altogether new dimension.

As well as remembering and thanking God for the historic liberation of their Jewish spiritual forebears from Pharaoh's tyranny, Christians would henceforth give thanks for the wondrous liberation and salvation won for them by the victorious death and resurrection of God's Son.

And this is where Jesus raises the Passover Meal onto an entirely new plane. Formerly, the saving acts of God had become present only to the minds of the Jews by the simple fact of their remembering them. ***Now Christ, by the Holy Spirit's power and his own, would make really present in Sacrament the very events the mind was remembering.*** And these events were his Last Supper, his Death, and his Resurrection - the pivotal happenings in the history of the Universe.

From now on, the Lord's Death and Resurrection would not be just in the mind, but also in outward reality, in actual fact, in the consecrated elements, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

So, coming back to our starting point, Christ is not passively sitting there in the Eucharist, He is there as the Crucified Christ; He is there as the Rising and Glorified Christ. He is there in the enactment of the Crucifixion itself; there in the dynamism of the Resurrection. (Our Bishop should rightly have said, “Good night my Crucified Lord” or “Goodnight my Lord, Rising and Glorified ”!)

### **Let’s put it all together**

**The Last Supper.** The celebration of the Holy Mass, the Memorial of the Lord, makes Christ present in the actual event of his Last Supper. Not a repetition for the millionth time, but a *re-presentation* of the actual once and for all, real-time event.

The word *represent* has an almost totally different meaning in this theological context from the multiple meanings it has in everyday speech. And the difference is important to notice. Theologically speaking it means ***to make present: to re-present. It does not mean to repeat or to stand for.*** In the context of the Mass, it indicates the divine activity which makes Our Lord’s Supper, Crucifixion and Resurrection actually present to us. I find it easier to understand this if I think of it in reverse - the Sacrament enabling me to be really present at these

sacred events. Either way, it is a Time Warp of divine devising.

Therefore it is not imaginatively or fancifully, as it is with cinema and theatre, that we are present to the action. We do not enter the Upper Room and share the original Last Supper with Jesus in a whimsical or fairy-tale manner, we do so in actual fact every time we attend Holy Mass. We are there, it is as simple as that and as real as that. We approach the table and ask Peter and John to make room for us to sit. From Christ's own lips we hear the sacred words of consecration; from Christ's own hands we receive the Bread of Life and the Cup of eternal Salvation.

**The Crucifixion.** That crucial and utterly sacred moment when Christ died for the salvation of the world is also simultaneously made present in the Mass. That saving event which happened in Jerusalem two thousand years ago is now *re-presented* in the Church, the New Jerusalem of today.

This is why we can talk about the *Sacrifice* of the Mass. The Mass is a sacrifice simply because it *is* the very same Sacrifice of Christ made present to us. It means that at its celebration we stand beneath the Cross of Christ as really as Our Lady did, or St John. In our next chapter we shall consider what we are

really doing as we stand in this awesome presence of the Crucified Christ.

**The Resurrection.** The moment of resurrection was hidden from the eyes of the Apostles, even from the eyes of his Mother. She and the Apostles witnessed the empty tomb and the Risen Christ Himself; but they, nor we, were permitted to see that sublime moment when Christ rose from the dead. That moment is made present in the Eucharist, but because the Sacrament hides the reality under the forms of bread and wine, we do not see it either. But it is there, the glorious rising of Christ from the tomb, and we are present to it. The Risen Christ is here among his people, as present to us as He was to Mary Magdalene in the garden or the disciples in the Upper Room. He is so really present in the mystery of his rising from the dead that we, by attending Mass, become ourselves witnesses to the world of his Resurrection, not in the same way as the eye-witness Apostles were, but just as really.

This understanding of what we mean by the word *Memorial* and what Our Lord meant when He used it at the Last Supper tells us exactly what the Mass is, as far as our minds are able to pierce the Sacred Mystery: it is the celebration of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord through the re-enactment of the Last Supper.

It is the great Mystery of Faith, which stands at the heart of the living Church of Christ: *the Liturgy* (the Mass) *is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her powers flow.* (Vat II. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. 10).

## 45. THE ACCLAMATION AND THE MEMORIAL PRAYER

The Priest, as he rises from his genuflection, acknowledges that here on the altar before him is Christ in the mysteries of his Death and Resurrection. He says immediately *The Mystery of Faith*. It is a simple statement. The congregation makes reply, using one of the formulae set out in the Missal. There are three of them; each one proclaiming in biblical language the meaning of the memorial, as we discussed it in the last chapter.

*We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.*

*When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord until you come again.*

*Save us, Saviour of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free.*

The word *proclaim* means to announce officially and publicly. The congregation announces officially and publicly their faith in this great and wonderful mystery.

### **The Memorial Prayer (Anamnesis)**

What the people have just declared to be their faith, the Priest now goes on to repeat, as he addresses the Father.

*Therefore, as we celebrate the memorial of his Death and Resurrection, we offer you, Lord, the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you. (EP2)*

*Celebrate the Memorial* are words that occur at this point in all four of the main Eucharistic Prayers. They express in just three words exactly what the Eucharist is, what we tried to explain in the last section.

If you look up the word *celebrate* in the Oxford Dictionary, this is the definition you will find: *publicly to acknowledge a significant or happy event with a social gathering or enjoyable activity*. Mass is the social gathering or enjoyable activity, while the significant event is the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.

### **As we celebrate...we offer**

But this prayer, or the *anamnesis* (remembering) as liturgists refer to it, would be simply a further spelling out of what the congregation has just proclaimed, were it not for an essential and amazing dimension this prayer also includes.

Look at the prayer again: *Therefore, as we celebrate the memorial of his Death and Resurrection, we offer you, Lord, the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you.*

Amazingly, the prayer expresses our positive involvement in the Memorial. *As we celebrate...we offer*. The Sacrifice of the Cross is made present and we, by offering the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation, are actually offering with Christ his very own sacrifice.

Imagine the intensity of the feelings of Our Lady, St John and the other Marys at that moment when the Cross was lifted up. Maybe they didn't fully understand what was going on, but they were heart and soul at one with Jesus; of whatever He was doing, they sensed they were an integral part.

Since then, the Church has taught us exactly what was going on. Christ was offering his very self to the Father for the reconciliation of the world. Divine love and human love were embracing, expressing themselves in utter fullness. Standing now with Our Lady and the others, as this crucial moment in history is made present to us, we join with Christ in offering Himself to the Father. His Sacrifice becomes our sacrifice as well. He actually allows us to take part in it, stupendous though the deed is. Not just spectators, not just believing spectators, but sharers in the action, privileged beyond measure, *exercising that royal priesthood of Christ given to us at baptism*. There is no limit to what God accomplishes in his Eucharist!

Bearing in mind this tremendous privilege, the prayer continues: *giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you*. How could anyone fail to give thanks for this?

## 46. THE SECOND EPICLESIS

Remembering that the Roman Eucharistic Prayer (EP1) had no obvious epiclesis at all and only one explicit reference to the Holy Spirit, it is wonderful to see how the working of the Holy Spirit is now recognised in our western liturgies. Not only do all our Eucharistic Prayers have an Epiclesis, the prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit which we have earlier dealt with, but now they have two, the latter being imaginatively called *The Second Epiclesis!*

In all the Eucharistic Prayers it follows immediately on the Memorial Prayer. Here it is as it appears in EP2:

*Humbly we pray, that partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.*

The thinking behind this prayer follows naturally from the Memorial Prayer. There we spelt out our faith that Christ, in the mystery of his Death and Resurrection,

is made present in the Sacrament. Looking forward to receiving this Sacrament, we pray that the Holy Spirit, who has effected the transubstantiation of the bread and wine, may likewise change us into Christ, making us one with Him and with one another in the Church. We see here the Holy Spirit working in tandem with the Eucharistic Christ to bring about on earth that eternal plan for the whole of humankind, hidden in the Heart of God from all eternity, and now revealed to us in Christ.

## 47 COMMEMORATIVE PRAYERS: CHURCH

Once the Second Epiclesis has been said, the Eucharistic Prayers continue in a mode of intercession and commemoration. In the light of what is proclaimed in the Memorial Prayer, where we recognise ourselves as offering Christ's very own sacrifice with Him, these intercessions are particularly significant and carry great weight. These prayers are

the same in every EP, though expressed and arranged differently in each.

So let us again follow the Second Eucharistic Prayer: *Remember, Lord, your Church, spread throughout the world, and bring her to the fullness of charity, together with N our Pope and N our Bishop and all the Clergy.*

In this way, we always pray for the Church whenever we come to Mass. The Mass, the supreme Sacrament, is not the property of priest, bishop or even pope, it belongs to the Church. It was given to the Church by Christ and therefore no one has the right to interfere with it or change its prayers except the Church herself to which it rightly belongs.

We had occasion when discussing the Church in the Creed to point out that the word *Catholic* means *spread throughout the world*. We ourselves are part of that Universal Church, that Body of Christ in the world. We pray, therefore, for ourselves, that we may be worthy of so great an honour. We pray for our fellow Catholics in their various needs, especially those who live where the Church is suffering and persecuted, and who share in Christ's sufferings in a physical as well as a sacramental way, who feel the actual the pain of the Cross as well as celebrating its

Sacramental Memorial. We pray for those who do not belong to the Church in her fullness as it subsists in the Catholic Church, but who, nevertheless, are by God's wonderful grace, affiliated to her. We pray for the blessings of charity, peace and unity upon them and their communities.

## **The Hierarchy**

In the context of the Church, mention is always made in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Pope, the Bishop and the Clergy. Though it is hard to credit it now, within living memory many people thought these clerics *were* the Church. Thank God we all recognise today that they are her members first and foremost; only then are they officers and ministers within her. We pray especially for them because of the essential function and responsibility they hold.

Precisely because of the apostolic power passed on to them through the Sacrament of Orders, the Church exists and the Sacraments are celebrated. Without them there would be neither Church nor Sacraments.

The Pope is the visible head of the Church, our Holy Father. We pray for him at every Mass we attend, expressing our personal love for him, acknowledging him as our father in Christ and recognizing the huge

burden of responsibility he has accepted for the sake of the Church. He is the Vicar of Christ, the one who represents the Lord as Shepherd and Leader of the world-wide flock. He is the *Servant of the Servants of God*, exercising his authority over his people, both clergy and laity, as Christ did, not as one seeking to be served by them but as their actual servant. He is the Rock of Peter's Faith in today's world, guaranteeing the definitive truth of what the Church teaches. He is the Church's visible sign of unity.

The Bishop is appointed by the Pope and shares his ministry to the Universal Church, as the Apostles shared Peter's. His ordination gives him a *full* share in Christ's priesthood, empowering him to ordain future bishops and priests. He is High Priest to his diocese. By his leave, the priests, who share to a lesser degree in Christ's priesthood, co-operate in his work of pastoral care. The priest celebrating the Mass does so by his authority, and in so doing makes him present in spirit. It is only right, therefore, that we pray for our local diocesan bishop at every Mass we attend.

## **48. COMMEMORATIVE PRAYERS: HOLY SOULS**

Eucharistic Prayer II continues: *Remember, also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in your mercy; welcome them into the light of your face.*

In all the Eucharistic Prayers there is commemoration of and prayer for the souls of the faithful departed. By this prayer we remember those who in their lives were nearest and dearest to us, people set in our way by the providence of Almighty God, often people to whom we owe a deep debt of gratitude. While praying for these in particular, we do not forget our obligation of prayer for the great multitude of the departed. St Thomas Aquinas reminds us *that the Mass is offered in the Church for the living and the dead, so that what was instituted for the salvation of all may be for the benefit of all.*

Having just been praying for the Church, we are here reminded that those who have *fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection* are still as much a part of the Church as we ourselves. It has been traditional to see the Church, as it were, in three tiers: the Church on earth, the Church suffering in Purgatory, and the Church triumphant in heaven. The Mass makes reference to all three.

Funeral homilies these days tend to canonise the deceased immediately, omitting all reference to Purgatory. This is most understandable in the circumstances of grief, but we should generally not forget the Church's constant teaching on Purgatory, where we will be purified and purged of our sins that we may see the Face of God with joy. To enter that Presence in sin would be worse than hell.

Purgatory is not something dreamed up by theologians (as Limbo was), but taught by Christ, who warns us in the Sermon on the Mount that you, *you will not get out until you have paid the last penny* (Matthew 5:26). Nor should we view it as some terrible and vengeful creation of the Lord. On the contrary, it is just another of his kindnesses, the last stage of our life's journey kindly readying us for that eternal and engrossing Beatific Vision, the ultimate dividend of Christ's bitter Passion.

The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed should also bring home to us the communion we enjoy with these beloved souls. When the Sacrifice that redeemed them and gives them the *bright promise of immortality* is being celebrated here below in Sacrament, they will surely be present. We thus enjoy a closer fellowship with our departed loved ones in the Mass than is possible at any other time or place.

## The Communion of Saints

Eucharistic Prayer II continues:

*Have mercy on us all, we pray, that with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with the blessed Apostles, and all the Saints who have pleased you throughout the ages, we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life and may praise and glorify you through you Son Jesus Christ.*

*Coheirs to eternal life.* What an exciting and meaningful phrase that is! If we unpack it, we see that it defines us exactly: that is precisely what we are, or should be, co-heirs to eternal life. Not just heirs, looking forward to a solitary inheritance, but coheirs, looking forward to a joint inheritance, shared by our closest loved ones, principal among whom will be Christ, our Friend and Brother, Our Lady and the Saints. It is like being in possession of a ticket to a party when we know that all the people we like best will be there. But this party is something more; a party of life, *drinking from the living stream that flows from the fountain of life* (St Columbanus); a re-union; a communion; a party that lifts us to the very heights, to share the intimate company of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With such a ticket to heaven as this in our

pocket, we should have a feel-good-factor in our hearts every day of our lives.

I love this Commemoration of the Saints as it appears in Eucharistic Prayer One. It reminds me of a new-comer to school, parish or any other human organisation, who feels rather an outsider when he most certainly is not. Like standing on the outside of a group and shyly asking to be let into the inner circle: *To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy Apostles and Martyrs: with John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias...* and, of course, with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## 49. THE DOXOLOGY

All the Eucharistic Prayers end with exactly the same words. The Priest, holding the sacred Host on the paten in the one hand and the Chalice in the other, sings or says

*Through Him, and with Him and in Him, O God almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory is yours for ever and ever.*

## The Great Amen.

The Amen with which the People respond to these words is called the *Great Amen*. We say Amen at the end of every prayer, a word which simply means *I agree with what has been said*. The Priest speaks out the Eucharistic Prayer on our behalf, as our representative before God. It is our Prayer. Our Amen at its conclusion is our assertion that we accept and believe with all our hearts what has been said and done on our behalf, and particularly that we agree with this final statement which, in a sense, sums up the entire Eucharistic Prayer. And our *Yes* to what has been said and done in the Eucharistic Prayer is indeed a mighty *Yes*, a Great Amen.

These final words of the Eucharistic Prayers are called the *Doxology*, a word that means speaking out praise or giving glory. It strikes me that there are three dimensions to this Doxology, all of them important:

***First***, the prayer asserts that it is *through Him* (Christ) *and with Him and in Him* that all glory is being given to the Father.

This asserts and reminds us of a basic principle of our spiritual life: that *only through Christ* can we give

God any praise at all, or thanksgiving or glory. All our prayers must go through Him if they are to reach the throne of God, for *there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, (1 Tim 2:5)* He is with us always; there is no getting away from Him - even should we want to (cf. Ps 138). Without Him we would have no salvation, no access to the Father.

Christ is in us *individually* and *socially*, as members of his Body the Church. *To be in Christ* is, in fact, a technical phrase throughout the New Testament indicating membership of the Church. *In Christ we, though many, form one body* (Romans 12:5).

And, let us take careful note, that it is only through Him (though they do not realise it) that non-Christians too have their access in prayer to God. Christ died for us *all*; He is the Saviour and Mediator of *all*.

***The second feature*** of the doxology is encapsulated in the word *all*. *All honour and glory is yours...* What an astonishing thing for any mere mortal to say to Almighty God! That we are giving Him all honour and glory – not just some, not even a lot, but all!

To say these words to Almighty God, such a human being must needs be stark staring mad – unless he

holds in his hands the Sacrament that contains within itself the very Son of God in the act of sacrificing Himself on the Cross. Only Christ can give God all honour and glory because *He alone is the Holy One, He alone is the Lord, He alone is the Most High*, because He is equal to God, because He *is* God. In the Mass, where Christ is one with us and in whose sacrifice we share, it becomes possible for us to say these dramatic words with absolute truth.

***The third facet of the Doxology*** that we can reflect on is its final words *for ever and ever*. We declare in these words that the honour and glory we are giving our almighty Father in this Mass is not something temporal, confined to this passing moment, but something that will last into eternity, for ever and ever.

Can you remember the Mass you went to on Sunday 12 September 2000? No? Neither can I. But God can and always will! That Mass, when you gave God all honour and glory, will live for ever. It has to, for it is an eternal reality, the ever-living presence of Christ's Pascal Mystery - surely a comfort to us who too readily remember all our failings while forgetting quite whatever good we may have done. And there is nothing comparable to the good we do in the Holy Mass.

# PART FOUR.

# THE RITE OF HOLY COMMUNION

## 50. THE OUR FATHER

With the Eucharistic Prayer completed and the Sacrament of the Eucharist there before us on the altar, the priest says:

*At the Saviour's command and formed by divine teaching, we dare to say: Our Father....*

We rise to our feet and this very change of posture reminds us that we are moving into a new phase of the Mass. We offered gifts of bread and wine to God; He took hold of them and changed them into the real presence of his Son; now He gives us back our original gift but changed beyond all imagining. We now begin our immediate preparation for the reception of Holy Communion.

## The Lord's Prayer

It is often said that the *Our Father*, or the *Lord's Prayer* for it was He who taught it to us, is the very model of all prayer and that everything we ought to say to the Father is contained in this simple collection of simple sentences.

Although we have been familiar with the *Our Father* since earliest childhood and have known it off by heart since then, we need to be conscious that, because it is the Lord's Prayer, there are depths to it that we may not yet have fathomed. Only He could have composed such an appeal to the Father, so simple yet so utterly profound, with so few words yet with such vast horizons. What follows here is a hopelessly inadequate summary, which, hopefully, may prompt further personal reflection.

As the model of all prayer, it would seem very sensible for us to use it periodically for meditation, to spend time in its company, pondering it, thinking about it. As the days, months, years go by, it will release its deepest meaning to our deepest self. Without having meditated on it in the silence of our private lives, it is virtually impossible to pray it

meaningfully at Mass, when it is recited so relatively quickly.

**At the Saviour's command and formed by divine teaching we dare to say...**

*Dare.* This word has long been in use and is a direct translation of the Latin. What it means is that we, dust and ashes that we are, have courage enough to address the Almighty God as *our Father*. We do this because the Lord himself so commanded us; and, having been formed by the divine teaching of Jesus Christ, we recognise that, born again by water and the Holy Spirit, we are indeed children of the Father and co-heirs with Christ of the Heavenly Kingdom.

## **Father**

If we could only understand what we really mean by the word *God*, we would tremble at daring to call him *Father*.

At the heart of Christian revelation, as we have already noted, lies the liberating fact that this God of ours is not hostile to us, as the pagan gods were, but loving beyond measure. This, in essence, is why the Christian revelation is called the Gospel, the good

news. It is important that we acquire the habit of thinking of God in this way. In the First Eucharistic Prayer we pray: *Be please to look upon these offerings with a serene and kindly countenance* - that is precisely how we should always think of God, as smiling on us.

### *Our Father*

Our Lord taught us to call God *our* Father, not *my* Father, though this individual approach is implied: if God is Father of us all then He is my Father too. But the significance of the plural is not to be passed over lightly. To recognise in our deepest heart that God is our Father means that we acknowledge other people as our brothers and sisters. This is true of everyone, for everyone is a child of God. To live out what we imply by these two words would profoundly change our attitudes, to ourselves, to other people whoever they are, and even to our politics, which are ultimately about relationships.

But yet more is implied by this use of *Our*. As baptised Christians, we have become members of *God's household, which is the Church of the living God* (1 Tim 3:14). We are family - kith and kin - with Christ and with God. In this unique family sense too we call God *our* Father.

## **Hallowed be thy Name**

This petition of the Lord's Prayer means far more than a pious hope that the Lord's Name may not be taken in vain. Out of sheer deference to the majesty and greatness of God, a pious Jew would not even speak his Name, *Yahweh*, revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Only the High Priest would do this, and he only once a year. The Jew would refer to *The Name* instead of speaking out the sacred word itself. The *Name* meant God Himself. Christ is thus instructing us to hold God in the highest possible reverence and respect. This veneration and respect is a routine feature of Old Testament spirituality affecting every way the pious Jew would live out his life and is often referred to as the *fear of the Lord*. This attitude towards God, so evidently missing in our modern society today, should profoundly shape and influence our lives too. Only by living truly in the fear of the Lord can we sincerely say: *Hallowed be thy Name*,

## **Thy Kingdom Come**

The third decade of the newly introduced Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary meditates on Christ's *Preaching of the Kingdom*. This implies that Pope John Paul II, who thus refashioned the Rosary, would

sum up the content of Christ's preaching as *The Kingdom*. In that preaching, the Kingdom generally means the Church. When Christ instructs us to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, He is telling us to pray for his Church.

The Kingdom is the Church because the Church is everything God wants to achieve in the world. He wants us to be reconciled completely to Himself through Christ and in the Holy Spirit; He wants us to live in perfect communion with Him through the Eucharist, knowing his Word and obeying it, knowing his love and responding to it, and consequently living in peace and harmony with our fellow men. Only in the Church, which knows none of the divisions we create among ourselves and which provides us with all the means we need to achieve what God wants of his world, can this dream of God become a reality.

To pray for the prospering of the Church, for its growth and development throughout the world, for its peace and unity, for its constant renewal, is to share in the deepest desires in the heart of God.

### **Thy will be done**

To do the will of his Father was a key motive and characteristic of Christ's life on earth: *For I have*

*come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me (Jn 6:38). And when the chips were really down: Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:39)*

Many devout Christians, maybe not admitting it even to themselves, fear to let go completely and say sincerely to God: *thy will be done*. But his will is the very best thing that can possibly happen to us! He wants only what is good for us, only the very best for us; and, unlike ourselves, He really does know what that is and how to achieve it.

## **Give us this day our daily bread**

In the context of the Mass, these words, *give us this day our daily bread*, refer to the Eucharist, the Bread of Heaven. *Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you... it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.” Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:34-35)*

*Sir, they said, always give us this Bread.* We too stand with hands reaching out for this mysterious Bread,

remembering that it is the Father who is giving it to us.

Of course, the words have another more ordinary sense too, referring to our need for daily sustenance. Here bread stands for all our human needs. The word *our* again reminds us that we are not selfishly seeking our own needs but praying also for those who are deprived, in varying degrees, of their proper share of the earth's supply of daily bread. We cannot partake sincerely of this Bread from heaven if we ignore those who do not have sufficient access even to the bread this world can offer, or to the other indispensable requirements, such as suitable shelter which is essential for dignified human existence.

**Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

In saying these words, we put a condition on our very own request: *only forgive us, Lord, if we forgive them.*

After teaching us the Our Father, Our Lord refers back to this very clause alone and adds: *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins either.* (Mt. 6:14-15). Most of us, when saying

this particular petition in the *Our Father*, tend to lay the stress on the word *against*. Try putting the stress on the word *our* and the final *us* instead, and you will find that the essential thrust of this petition becomes more evident. On several other occasions too Our Lord makes the same point, much in accord with his general teaching that the measure we meet out to others will be the measure given back to us.

**And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.**

This is perhaps the most difficult to understand of the petitions in the *Our Father*. As if God would lead us into temptation! But, of course, this is just the Aramaic way of saying things, contrasting the negative with the positive; we see it used throughout the Psalms.

God does lead us frequently into situations where we are severely tested, take illness for an example, but He is always there with us, holding us, and giving us the challenge and opportunity to prove our faith in Him, to trust Him and to move forward. And we know that in *all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose* (Rom.8:28).

Evil surrounds us at every turn and our petition that God deliver us from it is urgent and heart-felt. Because of the complexity of evil in the world, not only Original Sin but also the web of iniquity and immorality that everywhere seems to prevail, a liturgical gloss or annotation has been added to the *Our Father*. This is called the *Embolism* and is the subject of our next chapter.

## 51. THE EMBOLISM

The Church's understanding of the word *Embolism* is rather different from what we normally mean by that word today. It comes from the Greek word *embolismos* meaning an *add-on*. In the Church's vocabulary it refers to the prayer *Deliver us Lord* which follows immediately on the *Our Father* and it is called the *Embolism* precisely because it is has been added on to it. This is the reason why we don't say *Amen* after the *Our Father* as we normally would, because the embolism in effect continues the prayer. The *Amen* does not come till the end of the prayer for peace which follows the embolism, thus enfolding these three prayers in a liturgical unity.

The embolism has been in use for centuries in various forms and can be found in most of the ancient liturgies. Its purpose is to amplify and develop the reference to evil referred to in the last clause of the Our Father. Here it is as it appears in our present Mass:

*Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we wait the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.*

Unlike some of the ancient embolisms which left no room for misunderstanding as to which particular evils they wanted us to be delivered from, this prayer simply asks that we may be delivered from *every evil and kept free from sin and safe from all distress.*

It surely owes its existence to the passage in St Paul's letter to Titus (Titus 1:10 -2:14) where he instructs him (Titus was Paul's convert and successor bishop) to admonish the older and younger men, the older and younger women and the slaves about the evils of society from which they must turn away. The final words of the embolism are taken from this letter: *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to*

*all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)*

The struggle against evil will continue until Christ comes again when everything will be finally restored in him. This is the *blessed hope: the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.*

At the embolism’s conclusion both Priest and People say: *for the kingdom the power and the glory are yours now and for ever.* This is obviously an updated form of what is, for non-catholic Christians, the normal conclusion of the Our Father: *for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever.*

So we must ask ourselves: where does this doxology come from, and why do Catholics not normally say it at the end of the Lord’s Prayer?

First of all, the words are a reconstructed quotation from King David’s prayer as he consecrated his newly built temple: *“Praise be to you, Lord the God of our*

*father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom... (I Chronicles 29:10-13).*

This is its source, but when did the phrase get attached to the Lord's Prayer?

### **Not in the Scriptures**

It is not in the earliest recorded texts of the New Testament, where Jesus teaches the prayer, not in Matthew 6:9 following, nor in Luke 11:2-4. For this reason modern translators of the New Testament generally omit it, considering it an addition to, but not a part of, Our Lord's original prayer.

These words are not found in the Vulgate, St Jerome's fourth century Latin translation of the Bible which the Catholic Church has regarded as definitive over the centuries. For this very reason, the Church does not add the phrase to the Our Father. The Reformed Churches, on the other hand, using as normative the King James Version which does include these additional words, have employed them both for private use and in their liturgies.

## **Not in the Scriptures but in the early Liturgies.**

But while the phrase in question does not appear in the earliest versions of the Gospels, it does appear in many of the earliest texts of the Liturgy, some dating back to the second century. However, in the course of time, it fell out of use; the Tridentine Mass, which many of us grew up with, did not include it. But, when the Mass was being reformed after the Second Vatican Council, the liturgists decided to restore these words to their original liturgical setting. But they chose not to attach them directly to the Our Father but to the embolism.

It is therefore a very ancient part of the Mass and a very beautiful prayer too. It reflects the joy and excitement so characteristic of those early Christians converts who had found themselves so recently lifted from the darkness of paganism and thrust by the power of God into his wonderful kingdom of light.

## **52. THE PEACE**

The reference to peace in the Embolism is now taken up directly.

*Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles, Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will, who live and reign for ever and ever.*

This prayer raises and answers two questions: what is peace? and, what is the way to achieving it?

## **What is peace?**

Welsh, an ancient Celtic language contemporary with the ancient Hebrew, has two words for peace: *Heddwch* and *Tangnefedd*. The former means the kind of peace Britain has enjoyed since the end of the Second World War: no on-site hostilities. *Tangnefedd*, on the other hand, means something much more: an inner peace unable to be upset by any outward turbulence whatsoever.

These two Welsh words are completely parallel to the single ancient Hebrew word for peace, *Shalom*, in all its etymological variations. *Shalom* means a condition where war is not prevailing (*heddwch*); but it means much more. It means (*tangnefedd*) human nature complete in itself, in its relationships with God and in its relationships with its fellow men. It carries

an intimation of the delight which such wholesome and healthy relationships bring: that is why the Jews still use the word both as a greeting and a blessing.

But it is more even than all this: *Shalom* is a dynamic word, hinting at a progress forward, an advancement, an improvement: a still deeper relationship with God and still better relationships of justice and fairness within society. In the Old Testament, *Shalom* would be realised when the Messiah should come (hence the implied expectation in the word): *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* (Is.9:6)

And when the Messiah did come, his constant message, summing up his whole purpose, was *Shalom Aleichem, Peace be with you.* Or, as our prayer quotes: *Peace I leave you; my peace I give you.*

These words of Our Lord were spoken at the Last Supper, after He had washed the feet of the disciples and predicted Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. The Peace He bequeathes to us is a share in that unshakable Peace which reigned in his Heart when knowingly He stood on the very threshold of death by crucifixion. The peace He promises is different:

utterly steadfast, whatever the prevailing circumstances. *I do not give peace to you as the world gives it* (Jn 14:28).

## **How do we achieve this peace which Jesus leaves to his Church?**

I think the prayer we are considering helps us to answer this question in its next sentence: *Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church.*

Let us notice first of all that this is the only major prayer in the Mass that is directed not to the Father but to Jesus Himself. No longer is it Christ addressing his Father in heaven, as it is throughout the Mass, but the Church addressing Christ in her Sacrament. She asks that He look not upon our sins but upon the faith of his Church instead. We are asking Jesus not to look upon us in our isolation and sinfulness but to see us in context, as members of his Mystical Body, the Church.

*Soul of my Saviour*, one of the most popular hymns in the British Catholic hymnody, is a translation of a prayer called *Anima Christi Sanctifica Me*, composed probably by Pope John XXII (1244 – 1334) at a time when spirituality was flourishing wonderfully in the Church. His famous prayer contains much rich

medieval imagery, including: *Intra tua vulnera absconde me: in thy wounds hide me.* The believing Christian prays that he might so hide himself within the Body of Christ that, when the Father looks on him for judgement, He may see only his own beloved Son, our Saviour.

If we were able to see ourselves just a little as the Father sees us, then we would be well on our way to experiencing something of that peace Christ offers. He does see his beloved Son Jesus Christ when he looks upon us; He does see us hidden within the wounds of Christ who endured his passion precisely for our peace and reconciliation; He does love us with and within that same infinite and passionate love with which he loves his Son.

To see ourselves thus is to see the Church for what she really is and ourselves for what we really are, part of her, no longer isolated and alienated but united with the communion of saints in heaven and on earth, all moving forward under the trusted providence of God to that future fullness, of which the peace of Christ here is only an intimation, a starting point destined to terminate in the everlasting glory of God and the fulfilment of all his promises.

*You will be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.  
You will be a crown of splendour in the Lord's hand,  
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.  
No longer will they call you Deserted,  
or name your land Desolate  
for the Lord will take delight in you,  
and your land will be married.  
As a young man marries a young woman,  
so will the One who builds you marry you;  
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,  
so will your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:2-5)*

This is the full meaning of Salvation; this is the dynamic Shalom of which we have spoken. *Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church.*

## **The Sign of Peace**

The Priest then offers this Peace of Christ to the congregation and invites them to share it among themselves: *The Peace of the Lord be with you always... Let us offer each other a sign of peace.* The Mass is moving on, with that dynamism implied in the word Shalom, to the moment of Holy Communion when we shall receive Christ, the Prince and Giver of Peace, into the deepest reaches of our being.

The shaking of hands is an outward sign of peace. The person standing next to you represents Everyman; you are proclaiming that you are at peace, as far as within you lies, with all people on earth. If you are not, then heed the words of the Lord: *Leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift* (Mt 23:25).

## 53. THE AGNUS DEI

When the exchange of peace has finished, Priest and People say or sing together the *Agnus Dei*, yet another part of the Mass set to music by so many of the great western composers:

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.*

Referring to Christ as the *Lamb of God* (*Agnus Dei*) takes no one by surprise. He is prophesied as the

Lamb of God by Isaiah (Isaiah 53:7); pointed out as such by St John the Baptist whose very words the Priest later quotes (Jn 1:29); and referred to frequently by St John in his Apocalypse, where Christ is depicted as a Lion-Lamb, sacrificed to achieve our salvation and risen victoriously to deliver it.

## **But why a Lamb?**

Why exactly is Jesus repeatedly referred to as the *Lamb* of God?

It all goes back to the night before Israel's Exodus when God's destroying Angel struck dead all the firstborn children in the land of Egypt on account of Pharaoh's pigheadedness. This was the tenth and climactic plague. And symbolically the Passover Lamb was the *Saviour* of Israel.

Read the full story for yourself in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Exodus. It's important to remember that this is a very ancient tradition-story and that being a story and an inspired one at that, there is much in it that is prophetic and symbolic and therefore not immediately obvious. (Compare our treatment of the story of the Six Days of Creation in Chapter 19.)

To enable the Angel to distinguish between the homes of the Egyptians and those of the Israelites, the Hebrews were ordered, on the evening prior to that event, to slaughter a lamb and to smear its blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. They were further instructed not only to eat the lamb the following day but to repeat this rite annually. This was the origin of the yearly feast of Passover, the meal Our Lord was celebrating at his Last Supper. So, let us note the prophetic details of this story.

- A lamb is meek, gentle and wholly innocent - exactly as Christ was.
- The post of a door and its lintel provide the two essential requisites of a Cross.
- A wooden post and a crossbar smeared with blood symbolise a Crucifix.
- A people saved because of the blood of a sacrificed Lamb symbolises the Church saved by the shedding of the precious Blood of the sacrificed Lamb of God.
- The Lamb consumed by the family is a sign of the Eucharist.
- The annual repetition of the memorial rite of the Passover Meal kept alive in the memory of the Jewish People the salvation God had won for them at the Exodus. Likewise the Eucharist in its own

sublime and divinely superior way keeps perpetually alive for us the Paschal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.

## **Mercy**

We ask the Lamb of God to have mercy on us.

Mercy in the Bible translates the Latin Vulgate's *Misericordia* which in turn translates the Hebrew *Chesed*. This latter word is almost untranslatable and means far more than its English equivalent. As far as I can understand, it means all the good that God is able to give; it means his entire loving-kindness in action. When we pray that the Lamb of God have mercy on us, we are asking for all the blessings that he is able to bestow: on our past, present and future actions; on our physical and social well-being; on our spiritual life and our relationship with God; on our eternal salvation. And for this mercy we appeal to the Lion-Lamb who was slain out of love for us but who rose victoriously to devour our death and our iniquities and to give us everything we ultimately need.

**You take away the sins of the world.**

In the course of considering the Memorial Prayer, we frequently alluded to the Sacrifice Jesus was making

of Himself on the Cross. It was a Sacrifice because He was offering Himself in the fullness of human and divine love to his Father, but *what* exactly was the outcome of that Sacrifice and *how* did He, thereby, take away the sins of the world?

Reference to Jesus as the One *who takes away the sins of the world* occurs six times in the Mass: twice in the Gloria, three times here and once when the Priest shows the sacred Host to the people before reception of Holy Communion. What exactly do these words mean? No one could presume to answer that question adequately, but, with the help of the Scriptures, we can but try.

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, in the midst of other prophecies, there are scattered what have become known as the four *Songs of the Suffering Servant*. They tell of a Servant of the Lord chosen by God and filled with his Spirit who would go about doing God's work quietly and gently until he establishes justice upon the earth. (First Song: Is 42:1-4)

He was called to his life's work when still in his mother's womb and endowed with a penetrating power of prophetic oratory, making his mouth like a sharpened sword. His work was not to be confined to within the borders of Israel but he would be made a

light for the Gentiles, that God's salvation might reach to the ends of the earth. Though discouraged at times, he recognises that his reward is in the Lord's hands (Second Song: Is 49:1-6).

Not only has he a well-instructed tongue, but the Lord wakes him morning by morning like a disciple being instructed. Like all the prophets he meets opposition, but he does not turn away: *I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. They will bring legal charges against him but he is unafraid.* (Third Song: Is 50:4-9)

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and held in low esteem... Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all....*

*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

*By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. (Fourth Song. Is 53)*

These passages from the Prophet Isaiah leapt out of the page when the early Christians first read them after the Lord's Crucifixion. But the Jews, who, in their expectation of a mighty and conquering Messiah, could make little sense of them and paid them scant heed.

In the light of their own experience of Christ, it was, for the early Christians, as though the great Isaiah were speaking as one even closer to the Death of the Lord than they themselves had been as eye-witnesses. And, as a matter of fact, he was! As a divinely inspired Prophet of the Lord Most High, he speaks as one privy to the conversation between the Father and his Son, a dialogue otherwise hidden in the depths of

God. As one inspired, he was speaking in the Spirit, the same Spirit that had come down upon Jesus and taken possession of Him. *Who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them?* asks St Paul. *In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God* (1 Corinthians 2:11). This same Spirit who knows the thoughts of God, both of Father and of Son, makes them known through the inspired prophet Isaiah.

What the Spirit reveals through Isaiah is the inner meaning of Christ's suffering, the reason why the sacrifice was redemptive, why it saves us, brings us forgiveness and opens for us the gates of heaven. ***The revelation was that Christ was freely suffering on our behalf. He was taking our sins, both original and personal, upon himself and paying the death penalty for them as the Law decreed, so that we ourselves could go scot-free and live.***

Vicarious suffering, the kind of suffering Isaiah speaks about in his Songs of the Servant, is well illustrated by the story of Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941), a Polish priest who was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp, Prisoner No 18870, on 28 May 1941 for the critical stance his magazine was taking towards the Nazi Party.

In the July of that year, three prisoners escaped the camp, and to deter further defections, the deputy Camp Commander, Karl Fritzsch, ordered ten inmates to be executed by starvation in an underground bunker. Kolbe was not one of those randomly chosen to die, but when a young man, one of the ten, began to plead with the Commandant that he had a wife and children to care for, Maximilian stepped forward and volunteered to take his place. He did indeed take his place and was the last of the ten to die. When starvation had surrounded Kolbe with nine corpses, he was finally executed by an injection of sulphuric acid.

Maximilian Kolbe was canonised by Pope John Paul II in Rome on 10 October 1982, with the man he saved, Franciszek Gajowniczek, actually present at the ceremony.

Franciszek Gajowniczek should have died but he didn't because Kolbe died instead of him. We should die on account of our sins, for St Paul tells us repeatedly that *the penalty of sin is death*, but we live into eternity because Christ underwent the penalty of death instead of us. *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 6:22-23). *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our*

*sins according to the Scriptures.* (1 Corinthians 15:2-4)

There is one aspect, though, where this comparison between Maximilian Kolbe's death and Christ's falls down. Franciszek Gajowniczek and Kolbe were not enemies. Kolbe died for someone who had done him no harm. Christ on the other hand died for us when we were still alienated from God because of original sin and personal sin, when our relationship, our friendship with God, as it was meant to be, was still in pieces. This fact makes Christ's death for us all the more startling, the Mass all the more wonderful: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8).

*Lamb of God. who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*

## 54. THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

While the *Lamb of God* is being recited, the Priest takes up the sacred Host and proceeds to break it. Unsurprisingly this part of the Mass is known as the *Breaking of the Bread* or the *Fractio*, a term which

referred in the very early Church to the entire Eucharist, as we have already noted. Though the accounts of the Last Supper state that Jesus broke the bread before he pronounced the words of consecration, tradition has reversed this sequence.

## **The Mingling of the Body and Blood**

Having broken the consecrated Bread into pieces, a biblical and symbolic gesture (*because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf* (1 Corinthians 10:17), the Priest then goes on to drop a tiny fragment of the consecrated Host into the Chalice with the words: *may the mingling of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.*

I well remember one ill-instructed Catholic telling me that this was the most important moment in the Mass, for the coming together of Christ's Body and Blood restored the Lord to life and wholeness! We, who have now studied the meaning of the *Memorial*, know so much better than that!

But this liturgical detail does have an interesting history behind it. It was once the custom in Rome for the Pope to send particles of the Host consecrated at his Mass to his Cardinals celebrating in the other chief

churches of the city. These particles sent from the Holy Father would be mingled with the Precious Blood in the Cardinals' chalices as a sign of their unity with the Pope. So, far from bringing Christ back to life, which was what the Father did at that ineffable moment of the Resurrection, this little liturgical detail speaks of unity between ourselves and the Holy Father, and therefore is symbolic of the unity which, through the Eucharist, we enjoy with the entire Church.

## 55. RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

Having received Holy Communion himself, the Priest proceeds to distribute the Sacrament to the congregation. He lifts the sacred Host and showing it to the people says: *Behold the Lamb of God; behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb.* Saying the very words St John the Baptist used to alert his followers that Jesus was standing in their midst (John

1:29), the Priest adds: *Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb*

## **The Supper of the Lamb**

These words, *the Supper of the Lamb*, occur in the nineteenth chapter of St John's Apocalypse where we hear the news of the fall of Babylon, the symbolic city that stood for ancient Rome whose emperors were the terror of the Christians. It is a triumphant chapter describing the victory of the Lamb, the victory of the Crucified Christ over the powers of the world:

*Hallelujah. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"* (Ap.19:6-9)

A victory has been achieved; a wedding is to be celebrated. It is the wedding of the Triumphant Lamb; the Bride who has made herself ready is, of course, his Church.

## **The Wedding Supper is the Eucharist.**

Like a bridegroom giving himself away totally and unconditionally to his bride, Christ has given himself to us totally on the Cross, where he won the victory

over sin and death. There his love for us was revealed and utterly expressed. This self-giving of Christ to his Bride the Church is made present in the Mass as his Sacrifice is re-presented in the Memorial. At the moment of Holy Communion, however, this self-giving of Christ is individualised – He gives Himself to me, while I am given the golden opportunity of giving myself totally to Him in return. Uniquely, therefore, the Mass becomes the Wedding Ceremony between Christ and his People, both collectively and individually.

The Sacrament, which makes present the mutual love and self-giving of Christ and ourselves, is encapsulated in food, in Bread and Wine, the stuff of meals. It is the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. The Mass is, therefore, not only the Wedding Ceremony between Christ and his Church but also the Wedding Feast that celebrate it.

### **The Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ**

The short statements, *The Body of Christ, The Blood of Christ*, which the Priest says as he gives us Holy Communion, are, as we said earlier, a challenge: *Do you really believe that this, which looks like bread and tastes like bread, which looks like wine and tastes like*

*wine, is really the Body, the Blood of Christ? Our Amen is our Yes.*

But these words are more than a challenge to our faith: they also invite from us a response of loving commitment. A wedding contract requires faith and love and total commitment on both sides. We can be utterly certain of Christ's faith in us, love for us and commitment to us. On our part, by saying *Amen* to the self-giving Christ at the reception of Holy Communion, we are declaring our determination to reflect the Love being shown here and to be faithful to our Bridegroom as He is faithful to us. This *Amen* conveys to the Lord what is expressed by the binding *I Will* of the wedding ceremony.

### **The word Communion says it all.**

The Sacrament puts us in total Communion with God, one with Him who betroths us to himself, fulfilling the words of the Prophet Hosea, *I will betroth you to myself forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion (2:19).*

Holy Communion is a return to that spiritual paradise depicted in Genesis when the fellowship between God and his human creatures was still perfect and unsullied. It is a perfect expression of God's love; it is

the fulfilment on earth of Christ's work of salvation; it is the consummation of the silent workings of the Holy Spirit who breathes where He will. And *blessed indeed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb.*

## 56. THE BLESSING AND DISMISSAL

### **The Post Communion Prayer**

After the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest returns to his chair where, after a period of silent thanksgiving, he stands to read the Post Communion Prayer. This is the last *proper* prayer of the Mass, determined by the feast or season, and matches the Collect and the Prayer over the Gifts. Just as the Collect concludes the initial rites of the Mass and the Prayer over the Gifts the Offertory, so the Post Communion Prayer brings the Liturgy of the Eucharist to its close.

### **The Blessing**

The Mass ends with the blessing. Have you ever stopped to think what exactly we mean by the word blessing?

The Scriptures are full of reference to blessings and the Church keeps the tradition alive and well. The English language uses two words: *Blessing* and *Benediction*, the former deriving from Old English and the latter from Latin.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word Bless comes from the Old English word *bledsian*, based on *blod*, *blood*. Now this takes us back to our earlier discussion of the ancient practice of blood rites (cf. Chapter 38). We saw that those who engaged in these blood rites, when blood was mixed or shared, created a special relationship between themselves, of brotherhood, of pledged friendship. They would be on each other's side should trouble break out in their neighbourhood or country; they would be supportive and defensive of each other as true friends and brothers.

As the word *blood* developed into the word *bless* this underlying meaning carried through. Thus to be blessed by God was to receive his friendship and support and the assurance of prosperity. When God blesses mankind in the book of Genesis, just one

example out of many, He supports them and assures them of future prosperity by sharing with mankind qualities which belong essentially to Himself: *God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground”* (Gen 1:27-28).

*Benediction* is the other English word for blessing and derives from Latin *benedicere*, which is a combination of the verb *dicere* meaning *to say* and the adverb *bene* meaning *well*: thus, *to speak well of*.

According to an ancient mentality which finds frequent expression in the Bible, there is a fundamental difference between the Word of God and the word of man. Man’s word is feeble and fallible; but God’s word, once spoken, is creative and irrevocable; it cannot be stopped or recalled; it has to fulfil its purpose. This lies at the heart of our understanding of blessing. Let us consider just two examples from Scripture, which illustrate this point:

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that*

*goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it* (Isaiah 55:10-11). The word of God once uttered, like the rain once released from the clouds, gets about its business until its purpose is fully achieved.

The other example of the irrevocable word of God is the story of the blessing of Jacob and his brother Esau, where Jacob fraudulently obtains his father's last blessing by approaching the blind old man disguised as Esau who was Isaac's favourite and eldest son. As the firstborn, Esau had the right to his father's blessing, but Jacob cheated his father and stole it. Isaac was devastated when he found out, but there was nothing he could do about it: the blessing once given couldn't be revoked. All the heartbroken old father could say to his other son Esau was "*just before you came, I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!*" and indeed he was blessed. With his name changed to Israel, he fathered twelve sons who became the patriarchs of the Twelve Tribes.

Can we find a more powerful example than this to demonstrate the point that once God has spoken, his Word is irrevocable and the blessing will inevitably come about, as indeed it eventually did in Jacobs's case?

The fact that Rebecca and Jacob acted deceitfully seems to make no difference at all, even though it was treachery between wife and husband, son and father, even going so far as deceitfully to claim God's own intervention in the affair. In fact, it all just emphasises that ancient understanding of the irrevocability of God's word; once spoken it cannot be withdrawn. Read the fascinating story for yourself in chapter 27 of the Book of Genesis.

The Church today would hardly approve such deceitful behaviour, but the story demonstrates the principle of the irrevocability and the staying power of God's word. In the same mode of thought Jesus would say, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away* (Mt. 24:35)

God's word is creative; God's blessings always materialise. When God speaks, it happens. God said "*Let there be light,*" and there was light... The expression *Let there be ...and so it was* runs through the first creation account in Genesis like the refrain of a hymn. God's word is not only irreversible but also creative: it achieves what it says. Thus, when God speaks well of us (*bene-dicere*) the benefits happen, though we cannot always detect them, "*for my*

*thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8).*

## **Christ the Source of Blessing**

The Christian tradition, retained in most of the major denominations, is that only the ordained minister may bless in the name of God. In Catholicism, blessings are restricted to bishops and priests, the ordained ministers of the Church and sharers in Christ's Priesthood. Even the deacon has no faculty to bless. In giving his blessing, the priest or bishop speaks in the name of the Church, in the name of Christ. It is Christ who blesses, acting in and through the ordained priest or bishop. When a mother blesses her child, perhaps with the Sign of the Cross on its forehead, there can be no doubt but that this action finds God's approved and favour, and the prayer, which it effectively is, is heard. But this is of a different order from the official blessings of the Church.

## **May Almighty God bless you, the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**

The Mass ends as it began with the Sign of the Cross, and the blessing is given in the Name of the Blessed Trinity.

## **The Dismissal:**

Have you noticed that within the word *dismissal* is the word *missal*, the name we give to our Mass book? It seems that somehow the Mass got its name from this final sending out of the congregation. *Mass* derives from the Latin word *missa*, which occurs in this final *dismissal* of the congregation, *Ite missa est* (Go, it is the dismissal). How it happened, that the Eucharist should get its name from the dismissal, no-one seems to know!

Is there a hint here that this sending out is more than just a *dismissal*, but a *commission*, a sending out with a job to do, a mission to fulfil?

The Mass made present for us, under the form of Sacrament, the focal and decisive events of world history, the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. We were as really present to these events as Our Lady and St John were to the Crucifixion and Mary Magdalene and the Apostles to the Resurrection. As they became witnesses to the world, so too we become witnesses to the world. It is as witnesses to these things that we are commissioned by the Church to go out and tell the world what we have experienced in preached Word and celebrated Sacrament, that God loved the world so much that He sent his only begotten Son among us,

who died on a Cross and rose from the dead to bring us deliverance and life. We are the witnesses who have the message the world needs and longs to hear. This commission is a solemn duty laid on our shoulders as followers of Christ; we must strive in every imaginable way to bring to the minds and hearts of our friends and families the wonders in which we have been personally involved.

## 56. THE ON-GOING MASS

The Mass doesn't exactly stop when the Priest sends the congregation out as missionaries. It continues, in a way, because of the real and abiding presence of Christ in those who have shared in the Eucharist. It continues, in another way too, because of the Sacred Host consecrated at Mass and reserved in the tabernacle.

It is the ideal, but an impossible ideal, to consecrate the exact number of altar-breads needed for each Mass. In many churches, worshippers coming into Mass and wanting to receive Holy Communion, put an altar bread into a conveniently placed *ciborium* (the

vessel that holds them), to be brought up to the altar at the Presentation of the Gifts. But people forget and others come in late, so the exact number is rarely achieved.

So what does one do with too many or too few consecrated Hosts? If there is a surplus after the distribution of Holy Communion, they are put into the tabernacle; and if extra are needed it is from the tabernacle they are taken.

## **Tabernacle**

The word tabernacle comes from the Latin word *tabernaculum* meaning tent. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land, God dwelt with them in the *Tent of Meeting*, where Moses would go to consult Him. The tabernacle in our churches is where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, where God dwells among his people today even more really than He lived among the Israelites of old, and where we can go, as readily as Moses did, to consult the Lord.

## **Communion to the Sick**

In very early times, lay ministers used to take the Blessed Sacrament out to the sick, the housebound

and the dying. In those days they called these ministers *acolytes*, today we call them *Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist* (the bishop, priest or deacon being the *ordinary* minister). This ancient practice which fell out of use was revived by the Second Vatican Council.

Access to the Blessed Sacrament independent of Mass times is essential for the pastoral care of the sick and particularly of the dying, who may need the Eucharist at any time. This is the first and main reason why the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle.

## **Benediction**

Another reason is to make possible the celebration of *Benediction*. Benediction is the service of adoration where the Blessed Sacrament is put on view so that the faithful may spend prayerful time before it in worship and enter into its mystery. Many people to my knowledge first felt the call to become a Catholic Christian because of the extraordinary sense of the presence of God they experienced while attending Benediction.

## **Christ present in our churches**

The presence of Christ in the tabernacle ensures the ongoing post-Mass presence of Christ in the church. How empty the church feels on Good Friday and Holy Saturday when, by the *rubrics* (rules) of the liturgy, the Blessed Sacrament is removed!

The quiet peaceful sanctuary in the heart of a noisy town is not quite what it seems - in fact, it is infinitely more dynamic even than the high street itself! What is going on in the busy thoroughfares cannot compare with what is going on in the silent sanctuary. The reserved Sacrament in the tabernacle continues to be exactly what it was in the Mass: the presence of Christ in the moment of his dying and rising, the living Paschal Mystery, the dynamic focal point of history. This ongoing Presence continues to give all honour and glory to the Father and reconciliation to the world. To enter that presence is to enter that mystery. The practice of *visiting the Blessed Sacrament* is not so stuffy as some might think, nor can it ever be an out-dated devotion. The Eucharistic Presence of Christ in our churches brings a new dimension even to the cosmos itself: God Himself sacramentally present in time and space, a presence unique in the entire Universe.

## The Eucharistic Presence in Us

We may *visit* the Blessed Sacrament spending a little time before it, but Christ doesn't just *visit* us - He *stays* with us, dwells with us, invigorates us and transforms us. In one sense, we become living tabernacles ourselves, though this can give the wrong impression. We are not just an outward tent in which Christ dwells; the Sacrament is far more dynamic than that. It changes us on the inside, turning us progressively into the image and likeness of Christ, actually incorporating us into Him - as the term Holy *Communion* implies, it makes us one with Him. Our Christian journey is a progressive growth into this oneness with Christ; a mystery that will only become fully evident at our journey's end when this Sacrament will have done its work and we see the Lord face to face. Then, I am sure, we shall fall down before Him, thanking Him for the Holy Mass in our lives, for his saving Pascal Mystery which it constantly made present for us, and for everything else this great Sacrament meant to us and achieved in us.