

## **Formation for Eucharist: Eucharistic Prayer III**

Imagine that you had to compose the most important prayer of the Catholic mass, a new prayer that would serve as an alternative for one that had not changed substantially in about 1500 years. You would have to write a prayer that honored the tradition, spoke to contemporary needs, and fostered the participation of participation of people who up to now had been worshiping in silence.

That very task faced the group of liturgical experts charged with revising the entire mass after the Second Vatican Council. Its members undertook major revisions to clarify the purpose of the individual parts of the celebration as well as their relationship to one another. Surely the idea of adding alternatives to the Roman Canon must have filled the group with awe.

The group held a kind of contest among themselves. They formed six smaller committees and submitted samples of a new eucharistic prayer. Among the six offerings, one of them rose above the others, though it still needed some work. That text eventually became Eucharistic Prayer III.

It follows the structure of Eucharistic Prayer II, which was based on an ancient anaphora quite different from Eucharistic Prayer I (the Roman Canon). The structure of Prayer II influenced every single one of the new eucharistic prayers for the mass. The template is explained in paragraph 79 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal: the thanksgiving expressed in the preface, the Sanctus, the epiclesis, the institution narrative and consecration, the anamnesis, the offering, the intercessions and the final doxology. Those elements, which differ from the flow of Eucharistic Prayer I, were adopted for Eucharistic Prayer III.

Some parts are identical in all the prayers: the preface dialogue, the Sanctus, Jesus' words of institution, the memorial acclamations, and the concluding doxology and amen. Apart from that, the prayers enjoy some flexibility within their template.

Eucharistic Prayer III has no preface of its own. The writers wanted to imitate that much of the Roman Canon in order to suit it for the variety of prefaces available. That made this eucharistic prayer immensely functional. It fits any season of the year and any occasion celebrated. Prayer III receives its greatest flexibility from something that isn't even there: the preface.

After the Sanctus, the prayer transitions smoothly to the epiclesis. It says rather plainly that all creation rightly gives God praise. Every eucharistic prayer is a prayer of thanks, so the first words after the Sanctus just affirm what is going on. These lines were deliberately kept generic because the preface would be specific.

This section includes the word "sacrifice". After the Council some people feared that the Church's theology of the mass as sacrifice would lose ground against advances in the ecumenical movement. The word probably appears here to calm these fears. Deftly, the prayer places this sacrifice within an ecumenically sensitive biblical tradition articulated in Malachi 1:11. There God desires pure sacrifice in every place from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Characteristic of Eucharistic Prayer III, key words tie one section of the prayer to the next. This section opens with the word "Holy", recalling the Sanctus, and introduces the Holy Spirit, preparing for the epiclesis.

The epiclesis was composed to say explicitly what the community asks God to do: make these gifts holy by the Holy Spirit. The revised translation corrects the tense of one significant verb. The first English translation said, "we bring you these gifts," but the revised says "these gifts we have brought." Eucharistic Prayer III builds on the revised rite that preceded it. The "offertory" of the mass was redrafted to become the "preparation of the gifts," which introduced the procession of the gifts to the altar. The revised tense should make it plain that the gifts in Eucharistic Prayer III are those that were brought forward in procession. The epiclesis concludes with a reference to the "command" of Christ, which leads directly into the institution narrative.

The revised institution narrative and consecration begin with the word "For". That word has always been here in Latin to show the relationship between this section and what precedes it. The institution of the eucharist is one of the reasons the community gives thanks and praise. This section is not independent from the rest of the prayer, but integral to its overarching theme of thanks.

The anamnesis and offering are blended, as in Eucharistic Prayer II. The revised translation keeps the focus on the verb "we offer" while acknowledging we do it "as we celebrate the memorial." This anamnesis includes a reference to the second coming of Christ; the community remembers a *future* event because it is so integral to the paschal mystery.

The intercessions begin with a prayer for the Church, which links back to the previous section by the keyword "oblation". That may seem like an odd word, but Prayer III enjoys using a diversified vocabulary to speak about the sacrifice of the

mass. This section is based on an anaphora of Theodore of Mopsuestia, and here the revised English translation shows the influence of the first one. The Latin original says literally, "the Victim by whose death you willed to be pleased." But this sounds wrong in English, as if the Father had taken delight in the suffering of the Son. The first translation said, "the Victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself," and the revised is similar. Both differ from the Latin, but the solution clarifies for English-speakers the purpose of the death of the Son of God.

This section, often called a second epiclesis, is not as explicit as the first. The first English translation of this section put the request for the Spirit in a main clause: "Grant that we . . . may be filled with his Holy Spirit," but the Latin has always said it differently, and the revised translation captures the nuance: "grant that we, who are . . . filled with his Holy Spirit." These words do not request the coming of the Spirit. They assume that the Spirit is here. The request is for unity. Borrowing a line from Ephesians 4:4 and the anaphora of St. Basil, Prayer III prays that the Spirit-filled community "may become one body, one spirit in Christ."

The intercessions want a share with the inheritance of the saints. This section simplifies similar material from Eucharistic Prayer I. It also allows the local community to name its own patron saint, or the saint observed on the calendar this day. Eucharistic Prayer I did not permit that flexibility.

The prayers include a signature description of the community: the "pilgrim Church", an expression that bears the fingerprint of the Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 48. The intercessions for the living and the dead include those who are members of the community as well as nonbelievers: "all your children" and "all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life."

Eucharistic Prayer III was composed especially for Sundays and feasts, and it has accomplished what the writers set out to do. It has become a prayer much prayed and appreciated by the contemporary Church, solidly based on tradition.

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