

The Priest's Preparation and Thanksgiving for Mass

Vatican Aide Encourages Prayer Before and After Liturgy

The priest depends on his union with God for the fruitfulness of his life and ministry and the people of God rely on the priest to pray for them.

Jesus Christ entrusted to his closest followers a promise for any good they would do. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." [1] The same Jesus, in the context of many miracles that he worked, established times to be by himself so as to spend time in prayer to his heavenly Father. For Jesus, the formal prayer of the Liturgy was supported by an inner life whose privacy bore the intimacy that nurtures personal prayer. Ecclesial and community dimensions are strengthened by that personal relationship with God which believers hope to deepen.

The search for God, which gives meaning to the lives of those who love him, serves as a daily reminder that it is, to and from Almighty God that all blessings flow. Sacred Scripture describes vividly the nourishment Jesus drew from his hidden life of prayer. "He would withdraw to deserted places and pray." [2] Similarly, there is the sense of the times of day when Jesus was particularly receptive to the stillness of prayer wherein he sought the Father's will. Such times encourage specific concentration and uninterrupted closeness. "Then Jesus got up early in the morning when it was still very dark and went out to a deserted place, and there he spent time in prayer." [3] "And after he sent the crowds away, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone." [4]

The priest, conscious of his sharing in the work of Christ, strives by following Christ's example, to lead God's holy people through Christ and in the Holy Spirit to God the Father. He knows, all too well, since his own shortcomings damage the credibility of his witness, that he needs no less urgently to ask God to instill in him virtues proper to his state. Part of the homily provided in the rite of the ordination of a priest instructs the one who is to be ordained accordingly: "In the same way, you will continue the sanctifying work of Christ. Through your ministry, the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect, because, united to the sacrifice of Christ it is offered through your hands in the name of the Church in an unbloody way on the altar, in the celebration of the sacred mysteries. Recognize what you are doing and imitate [him] whom you handle so that celebrating the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord, you may mortify all vices within yourself and prepare to walk in newness of life." [5]

It can be seen, then, that the motive for a particular preparation by the priest before Mass and a thanksgiving afterwards are of benefit to the whole Church because a

priest who sanctifies the Christian people needs himself to have been filled with the Spirit of holiness. It always helps a priest if he has taken a moment to consider the texts he will pray during the Mass on that day whether or not the Mass has an assembly. Opportune reflections on the texts before him can stir his deeper desire for God. Textual preparation will constitute a coherent and liturgical preparation for Mass not least because it is based on Sacred Scripture. A priest who fosters personal silence in the time before and after Holy Mass will, by his disposition, encourage meditation.

The priest in a pastoral setting may struggle to establish the desired silence that the sacristy should exemplify especially at the times when he needs to greet and meet the faithful. For him, in particular, the texts of the preparation before Mass and of the thanksgiving afterwards offer wholesome thoughts to uplift the mind and heart of the priest and, in whole or in part, can be prayed at any time. They also recognize human constraints on time and afford spiritual assistance rather than the imposition of any obligation on the priest who is trying to celebrate Mass as reverently as he can. It is to be noted that the gentler rubric that supports the *Praeparatio ad Missam* and the *Gratiarum Actio post Missam* in the missal of 1962 appreciates the practical demands made on a priest.[6] No act of love is by definition perfunctory. Both before and after offering the supreme sacrifice of the love of Christ, it is to be desired that a priest will be moved to do what is possible to give time, even briefly, to enable spiritual preparation before Mass and an act of thanksgiving after the celebration has ended. He will feel strengthened for having done so.

The preparation of a priest for Mass will have been underpinned by the cycle of Liturgy of the Hours which enriches the life of any priest. The age-old wisdom of the *Ritus Servandus in Celebratione Missae*, still to be found in the early part of the Missal of 1962, presumes the intrinsic importance of the Divine Office for the inner life of the priest. It stated that Matins and Lauds had to have been completed beforehand. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the context of that instruction from centuries before had not envisaged evening Mass.[7]

Since Mass is now celebrated at any time of the liturgical day the need for such an instruction no longer applies but the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours carefully explains the connection between the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours: "Christ taught us: "You must pray at all times and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1). The Church has been faithful in obeying this instruction; it never ceases to offer prayer and makes this exhortation its own: "Through him (Jesus) let us offer to God an unceasing sacrifice of praise" (Heb 15:15). The Church fulfils this precept not only by celebrating the Eucharist but in other ways also, especially through the Liturgy of the Hours. By ancient Christian tradition what distinguishes the Liturgy of the Hours from other liturgical services is that it consecrates to God the whole cycle of the day and the night." [8]

Any comparison of the specific texts offered for the *Praeparatio* will note that the same prayers are included in both forms of the Roman rite though they have been reduced to four since the *Missale Romanum* of 1970. In the Missal of 1970 these prayers consist in a prayer 'Ad Mensam' of St Ambrose, the prayer '*Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, ecce accedo*' by St Thomas Aquinas, a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary '*O Mater Pietatis et misericordiae*' and the Formula of Intention, '*Ego volo celebrare Missam*'.^[9] Reflecting a first reform of indulgences after the Second Vatican Council which was published in the 'Enchiridion of Indulgences' of 1968, they do not mention the indulgences that had been granted to the recitation of these prayers by Pius XI but whose details had been published in the missal of 1962.

Ample texts adorn the missal of 1962. The antiphon, *Ne reminiscaris*, asks God to be merciful despite our own sins and those of all who went before us. This is followed by psalms 83, 84, 85, 115, and 129. *Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison* and the *Pater noster*, whose last two lines form the beginning of a series of versicles, are followed by a number of short collects. In some devotional manuals these seven collects have been attributed to St Ambrose and assigned to the different days of the week. However, as arranged in the missal, it is envisaged they be said in succession under one conclusion. All but the seventh collect concentrate on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The seventh is followed by the longer doxology that concludes a series of collects. The first collect prays that the Holy Spirit shine forth in our hearts so that we may celebrate the mysteries worthily. The second asks that we may love God perfectly and worthily praise him. The third begs to serve God in chastity and purity of heart. The fourth implores the Paraclete to illumine our minds. The fifth beseeches the strength of the Holy Spirit to drive away the forces of the enemy. The sixth asks for wisdom and consolation. The seventh calls upon God to purify us and make of us a place where he can dwell.

The lengthy *Oratio Sacerdotis ante Missam* is divided in the missal into seven segments, one for each day of the week, and forms a prayerful meditation about an imitation of the virtues of Christ the High Priest. Its import is no less comforting than exigent. The relevance of its varied themes is timely with a literary style that is insistent and intimate. On Sunday, the priest asks the Holy Spirit to teach him to treat the mysteries with reverence, honour, devotion and lowly fear. On Monday, he focuses on his need for perfect chastity. On Tuesday, the priest acknowledges inherent unworthiness to celebrate Mass and, while proclaiming his belief that God can supply him with all that he lacks, he asks for a perceptible awareness of the presence of God as he celebrates and, no less, to be surrounded by angels. On Wednesday, his list of the social needs of the people, for whom Christ shed his blood, comes to the fore. On Thursday, while begging the mercy of God, the priest is reminded of how providence overcomes human frailty. "You are merciful to all, O Lord, and you hate nothing that you have made".^[10] On Friday, he prays especially for the dead. On Saturday, the priest reflects on the great gift of the Blessed Sacrament and asks that it will lead him to see God face to face.

The '*Ad Mensam*' of St. Ambrose prays that the Body and Blood of Christ may forgive the priest his sins and protect him from his enemies. The 'Prayer of St Thomas Aquinas' asks that the healing power of the Blessed Sacrament may prepare the priest to see God eternally. In the 'Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary', the priest prays not only for himself but for all his brother-priests who are celebrating Mass on that given day throughout the world. There follow prayers to St Joseph, to all the angels and saints and then a prayer to the saint in whose honour the Mass shall be celebrated.

The 'Formula of Intention' reminds a priest of the mind of the Church concerning the celebration of Mass and of his rightful place within it. The priest is not working alone. What he does has been handed down by Christ to his Church, upheld by the teaching *Magisterium* of the Church and supported by tradition. The priest makes present the Body and Blood of Christ. He follows the rite of the Holy Roman Church. His purpose is to give praise to God and to the Church in heaven while praying for the Church on earth, for all who in particular have commended themselves to his prayers as well as for the wellbeing of the Holy Roman Church. Then, praying for all the faithful, the priest asks that the Lord grant to him as well as to all the faithful, joy with peace, amendment of life, a space for true penitence, the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit and perseverance in good works.

The corpus of texts that form the thanksgiving after Mass or the *Gratiarum Actio post Missam*, demonstrate love, humility and faith as they delight in the sublime gift of the Blessed Eucharist. The *Missale Romanum* of 2002 contains 'The Universal Prayer', attributed to Pope Clement XI, and the 'Hail Mary'. Otherwise, in common with the missal of 1962, it contains the 'Prayer of St Thomas Aquinas', 'The aspirations to the Most Holy Redeemer' or *Anima Christi*, 'The self-offering' or *Suscipe*, 'The Prayer before Our Lord Jesus Christ Crucified' or *En Ego*, and a 'Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary'. Such texts in the missal of 1962 were granted indulgences by Popes Pius X, XI and XII while some texts in the *Missale Romanum* of 2002 have also been included in the current Enchiridion of Indulgences.

In the missal of 1962, an antiphon precedes the Benedicite[11] and psalm 150. Observing the same structure as the Preparation for Mass, the *Kyrie Eleison* and versicles pave the way for a number of collects. The first prays that as the three youths were brought out of the flames unscathed, so may God's servants avoid the harm of vice. The second asks that the good works God has begun in his servants be brought to their fulfilment. The third, on a theme similar to the first, is a prayer about St Laurence, deacon and martyr, who proved victorious in his suffering. The devotions which the priest may recite *pro opportunitate* enjoy comparable expressions of gratitude and entreaties for protection in the journey to heaven. In succession to a 'Prayer of St Thomas' is another prayer or *alia Oratio*. The metrical hymn *Adoro Te* is followed by the much-loved *Anima Christi*. The *Suscipe* and the *En Ego* precede another prayer or *alia oratio* asking that the Passion of Christ

be the priest's strength, defence and eternal glory. Before prayers to St Joseph and to the saint in whose honour Mass was celebrated, the 'Prayer of the Blessed Virgin Mary' offers Jesus received in the Blessed Eucharist to Our Lady so that she can offer him anew in a supreme act of *latreia*, or of perfect worship, to the Blessed Trinity.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal states: "It is [...]of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass - that is, the Lord's Supper - be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful taking part in it, according to the proper state of each, may derive from it more abundantly those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood and entrusted it to the Church, his beloved Bride, as the memorial of his Passion and Resurrection".[12] The preparation of the priest for Mass and his act of thanksgiving afterwards complement each other. They feed reverence in the hearts and minds of the faithful who are helped to participate in the liturgy with greater intensity by a priest who has benefited from the opportunity to recollect himself. What encourages preparation beforehand promotes thanksgiving after Mass. Both continually lead the Church to and from the Eucharistic Sacrifice that celebrates and makes present the fruits of the Paschal Mystery until Christ comes again at the end of time.

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http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/details/ns_lit_doc_20100621_sac-praeparatio_en.html