

Gathered Together in Communion

An article on the first Eucharistic Prayer, the "Roman Canon." "The Roman Canon reminds us that we are at Holy Mass not only with our Lord, but also with people of every place and time."

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"I celebrate Mass together with the whole people of God. I will go still further: I am also together with those who have not yet come close to our Lord, those who are far away and are

not yet part of his flock; I have them too in my heart. And I feel that I am surrounded by all the birds that fly across the azure sky, some even looking the sun in the eye . . . And by all the animals on earth: the rational ones, we human beings, although we sometimes behave irrationally; and the irrational ones that walk on the surface of the earth or inhabit its hidden depths. That's how I feel when I am renewing the Holy Sacrifice of the Cross!"[1]

We have been considering different moments of the liturgical year, deepening our understanding of all the tones acquired over time by the Church's prayer. The above words by Saint Josemaria about the Eucharist, "the heart of the world,"[2] bring before us the true scope of Christian worship. As one of the messianic psalms already announced, the Church's worship embraces all space —*a mari usque ad mare*, from sea to

sea[3]—and all times—*while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.[4]*

Everything started from the Cross. There Jesus gathered the whole Church together in his prayer and thus shaped the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, of all places and times. And everything returns to the Cross: *omnes traham ad me ipsum, I will draw all to myself.[5]* In each Eucharistic celebration the whole Church is present, heaven and earth, God and mankind. Therefore, in the Holy Mass, not only political and social barriers are overcome, but also the barriers between heaven and earth. The Eucharist is *katholikos*, which in Greek means universal, catholic: everything is measured by it because God is there, and with Him all of us, in union with the Holy Father, all the bishops, and all believers of every time and place.

Let us look at some of the features of the Eucharistic Prayer, specifically the Roman Canon.[6] We will thus perceive the richness of the Church's prayer, which comes from God's richness. If we try to pray at Mass with this universal spirit, with the awareness that we are not alone, our Lord will expand our hearts—*dilatasti cor meum.*[7] He will enable us to pray with all our brethren in the faith, and make us God's memory, God's balm, God's peace for all mankind.

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

The Eucharistic Prayer starts with a Preface that always sets before our eyes reasons for thanksgiving. Sometimes we are not capable of appreciating all of them, as something that really affects us. But the Church does know what she is thanking God for, and we can trust her wisdom, even though sometimes

our understanding falls short. The end of every Preface reminds us that it is she, the Church of all places and all times, who celebrates the Eucharist, whether with a congregation of thousands “or whether it is only a boy with his mind on other things who is there to serve.”[8]

The Preface culminates with the *Sanctus*, “the unending praise that the Church in heaven, the angels and all the saints, sing to the thrice-holy God.”[9] We sing in union with the liturgy of Heaven, and we do so not only in our own name, but in the name of all mankind and the whole of creation, which needs our human voices. Through us, mankind becomes the “*leitourgos*” of creation —interpreters and priests of the song that created beings long to sing to God. “We name the heaven and earth, the sea and the sun and moon, the stars and all rational and

irrational creatures, visible and invisible, the angels, the virtues, the dominations, the powers, the thrones, the many-faced cherubim (cf. *Ez 10:21*), wanting to say with David, ‘O magnify the Lord with me’ (*Ps 33[34]:3*).”[10]

Memento Domine...

This ecclesial prayer, praying together with the whole Church, can also be seen in the intercessions.

“*Memento, Domine*—Remember, Lord,” we say; and then we ourselves become “God’s memory” for our family and friends, for those who count on our prayer, and also for all those that perhaps only He remembers. This is something essential in “our Mass,”[11] because “if we don’t think about God, everything ends up flat, everything ends up being about ‘me’ and my own comfort. Life, the world, other people, all of these become unreal . . .

When we no longer remember God, we too become unreal, we too become empty; like the rich man in the Gospel, we no longer have a face!”[12]

The prayer of intercession places us fully within the prayer of Jesus, mankind’s one mediator before the Father. “Since Abraham, intercession —asking on behalf of another—has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ’s, as an expression of the communion of saints.”[13] The first Christian communities shared intensely in this petition that knows no boundaries, as can be seen in the earliest Eucharistic texts. They tried to share the sentiments of the One *who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth.*[14] If we bring love and affection to the Eucharistic Prayer, God will enlarge our heart

and make it grow to the measure of Christ's.

With this magnanimity we pray in the first place for the whole Church: “Be pleased to grant her peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole world...” And we start by uniting ourselves with the Holy Father, the bishop of our diocese, and of course with the Father. Thus we pray “tightly gathered together, as a closely united family.”[15]

Then our intercession becomes a petition for all the faithful present and all those for whom the sacrifice is being offered. *“Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuaram N. et N. et omnium circumstantium...”* Remember, Lord, your servants, N. and N. and all gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to you ...” The first Eucharistic Prayer places before our Lord the needs of all

those, whether Christians or not, for whom we pray specifically, though it is not necessary to name them aloud. According to the rubrics, the priest joins his hands and prays briefly for those he wants to entrust to God. Saint Josemaria used to spend somewhat longer in this petition: “I make a very long *Memento*. Every day there are different colors, different tones, lights whose intensity varies in focus. But the common denominator of my offering is this: the Church, the Holy Father and the Work . . . I remember everyone, absolutely everyone; I cannot exclude anyone. I’m not going to say I won’t include this one because he is my enemy; or that one because he harmed me; or that other because he slandered me, or maligns me, or tells lies... No! I pray for everyone!”[16]

*Communicantes et memoriam
venerantes...*

The Roman Canon also reminds us that we are at Holy Mass not only with our Lord, but also with people of every place and time. So we speak not only about the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnate Word, about his death and resurrection, but we also name other important family members, because we know we are in their company as well.

“*Communicantes et memoriam venerantes...* In communion with those whose memory we venerate, especially the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord Jesus Christ, and blessed Joseph,”[17] followed by the names of twelve apostles, among whom Saint Paul is included,[18] and twelve martyrs from the first four centuries of the Christian era.[19]

It is not just an “honours list” like those we may sometimes listen to at official ceremonies, with a certain

degree of boredom and hoping it will soon be over. These are members of our family, “the great family of God’s children, the Catholic Church.”[20] At Holy Mass we are in communion not only with our brethren “scattered throughout the world,”[21] but also with our glorified brethren in heaven, and those who are being purified in order to behold the face of God with them. “In celebrating the sacrifice of the Lamb, we are united to the heavenly ‘liturgy’ and become part of that great multitude which cries out: ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!’ (Rev 7:10). The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth . . . and lighting up our journey.”[22]

Memento etiam, Domine...

Shortly after the Consecration, at the point where the other Eucharistic Prayers make all their petitions

together, the Roman Canon continues them. “Remember also, Lord, your servants who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace.” The celebrant pauses for a few moments and prays for the dead, and then continues with some heartfelt words: “Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace.”

The remembrance of our departed brethren focuses our eyes once more on fraternity, on our fellow men and women. The Holy Spirit again enlarges our hearts, for here we can pray not only for the dead closest to us, but also for all the men and women God has called to himself since yesterday. Some of them may have died alone, and God has gone out to meet them, and wiped the tears from their eyes.[23] “In the memento of the dead, what joy it is to pray for everyone! Of course I pray

in the first place for my children, my parents and my sisters; for the parents and brothers and sisters of my children; for all those who have approached me or Opus Dei to do us good; I pray for these with gratitude. And for those who have tried to defame us, to lie... with all the more reason! I forgive them with all my heart, Lord, so that you may forgive me. And I also offer for them the same prayers I offer for my parents and my children... And I end up being so happy!"[24]

De multitudine miserationum tuarum sperantibus

The Canon is drawing to an end, and intercedes once again for those present, the celebrant and the faithful. "*Nobis quoque peccatoribus famulis tuis, de multitudine miserationum tuarum sperantibus...* 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..."[25] The prayer names Saint John the Baptist followed by seven men martyrs and seven women martyrs. Like the lists of twelve we found above, seven is a number with a strong Biblical character. Twelve reminds us of God's choice (the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles, etc.), while seven is the symbol of plenitude, of completeness.

We turn our eyes to heaven. The People of God have recourse to their saints at the most transcendental moments of worship, and the Holy Mass is the place where the Church in heaven and the Church on earth know they are most closely united. Benedict XVI encouraged us to give thanks to God "because he has shown us his face in Christ, because he has given us our Lady, he has given us the Saints; he has called us to be one

body, one spirit with him.”^[26] As gratitude means appreciation, we can say with Saint Thomas Aquinas: “O thou, the wisest, mightiest, best; Our present food, our future rest; Come, make us each thy chosen guest; Co-heirs of thine, and comrades blest; With saints whose dwelling is with thee.”^[27]

[1] Saint Josemaria, get-together, 22 May 1970, quoted by Javier Echevarria in *Para Servir a la Iglesia*, Madrid: Rialp, 2001, pp. 189-190.

[2] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, no. 59.

[3] *Ps 71(72): 8.*

[4] *Ps 71(72): 5.*

[5] *Jn 12:32.*

[6] Unless otherwise indicated the following quotations are from Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman Canon.

[7] *Ps 118(119): 30.*

[8] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 89.

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1352.

[10] Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, V, 6.

[11] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 169.

[12] Pope Francis, homily, 29 September 2013.

[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2635.

[14] *1 Tim 2:4.*

[15] Blessed Alvaro, Letter dated 29 June 1975.

[16] Saint Josemaría, get-togethers on 1 April 1972 and 10 May 1974, quoted by Javier Echevarría, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Madrid: Rialp 2010, p. 106.

[17] In 1962 Saint John XXIII decided that his name should be included in the Roman Canon. In the Decree *Paterna Vices*, 1 May 2013, Pope Francis introduced Saint Joseph's name into Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV.

[18] Saint Mathias' name comes in the second list, after the Consecration.

[19] There are five popes, a bishop, a deacon, followed by Saint Chrysogonos (it is not known whether he was a priest or a layman) and four laymen.

[20] Javier Echevarría, Letter, 9 January 2002.

[21] Eucharistic Prayer III.

[22] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 19.

[23] See Eucharistic Prayer III.

[24] Saint Josemaria, get-together 10 May 1974, quoted in Javier Echevarria, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, p. 151.

[25] Although this prayer, “To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners...,” may originally have referred only to the celebrant and his ministers, it now seems clear, in the light of the other Eucharistic Prayers, that it is a petition for everyone to be united to the heavenly Church.

[26] Benedict XVI, Speech, 20 February 2009.

[27] Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hymn *Lauda Sion*.

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