

## *A Mystagogy of the Eucharist*

Gil Ostdiek

**M**any forms of preparation are being offered to pastoral practitioners as we approach the implementation of the new translation of the Roman Missal. These provide a wide range of pastoral approaches. One is a simple form of instruction which informs people of the changes in their parts, such as the response to the greeting, the *Confiteor*, *Gloria*, Creed, preface dialogue, memorial acclamations, and the invitation to Holy Communion.<sup>1</sup> Another approach explains how the new translations were made and gives the principles and rationale for making them.<sup>2</sup> There is also an approach which delves more deeply into the theology of the newly revised prayers.<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has chosen to approach the implementation of the revised Roman Missal as an opportunity for liturgical renewal in keeping with the fundamental principles underlying the Vatican II liturgical reform.<sup>4</sup>

The approach chosen in this essay is that of mystagogy.<sup>5</sup> It will be a reflective walk-through of the eucharistic mystery that we celebrate. Mystagogy typically asks two questions about a liturgical rite: what do we do, and what does it mean? We begin with a brief description of the liturgical actions and then reflect on the meaning they can have.

*Fr. Gil Ostdiek, O.F.M., teaches  
liturgy at Chicago Theological  
Union.*

Regarding that meaning, it should be noted first of all that the reflections given here are based on the ritual actions themselves, on prayers that accompany them, and on what church documents and others have said about them. If this reflective walk-through were being done in live interaction with people, it would strive to help them name their own experience and to enrich the reflections with their insights. It should also be noted that our purpose here is not to focus solely on the eucharistic celebration in itself, but especially to draw out the meaning it has for Christian living. It is this kind of liturgical catechesis for which people now hunger, a catechesis that will help them develop and deepen a truly eucharistic spirituality that can shape their Christian lives in the world.

### ***Gathering***

Celebration of the Eucharist begins officially with the entrance procession, accompanied by song, as the ministers enter through the midst of the gathered assembly. In an informal sense, however, the celebration begins much earlier, as people stream together from various directions and from their many walks of life.<sup>6</sup> The entrance procession is only the final ritual moment

of that informal process of gathering that has been underway and has brought the people together before the procession begins. The ministers are only a representative few, processing in the stead of all the gathered people who entered as the vanguard of that solemn procession.

What do we do in the entrance procession? A processional cross (or crucifix, if there is no permanent crucifix near the altar) flanked by two candles leads the solemn entry. Next come "the acolyte and other ministers," then the Gospel book held aloft by a deacon or else "a reader," and finally "the Priest who is to celebrate the Mass" (GIRM 2002/2010, no. 120). Why are cross, candles, and Gospel book carried into the assembly in solemn procession? What do they tell us about ourselves and the celebration that is to follow?

The cross tells the story of Jesus, of his saving death and resurrection. How does it tell his story? History has left us many images: a jeweled cross of victory, Christ peacefully asleep on the wood of the cross, a figure in the agony of death, one with outstretched arms reaching down to embrace the world in love.<sup>7</sup> But it is not only his cross. He also said that any who would follow him must take up the cross (Matt 10:38). It is also our story. History has left us many images of the cross as our story as well. Think of the gaunt and emaciated figure on the "plague cross" in Cologne (1301), which soon became a place of pilgrimage and prayer for those seeking healing during the time of the Black Death. Or think of the Isenheim altarpiece (c. 1510-1515), attributed to Matthäus Grünewald in the chapel of an Alsatian leprosarium, where afflicted patients could identify with the putrid-looking flesh and twisted extremities of the Crucified One. Think, too, of the realistic images of the scourged, crucified Christ so beloved when people find his sufferings played out in their own lives. There are so many ways, both large and small, in which we daily die to sin and self and rise to newness of life. The history of the world, says Karl Rahner, is a terrible and sublime history of dying and rising that reached its fulfillment in the dying and rising of Christ, in which all are joined in their daily moments of dying and rising. Rahner calls that the "liturgy of the world."<sup>8</sup> The cross carried in the procession also sums up that liturgy of daily dying and rising which every member brings into the assembly.

Candles are used to give light in the darkness. For Christians, the candle is the Easter candle, a symbol of the risen Christ who once said "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). He also said to his disciples "you are the light of the world" (Matt 5:14). He taught them that their light should be set on a lamp stand so that all might see their good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:15-16). The candles entering through our midst are the

symbols of the witness to Christ, however dim or bright, that we have given that week.

The Gospel book tells the story of the life, words, deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It also tells the story espoused as their own by those who are willing to follow in his footsteps and to lose their lives in loving service to others for his sake and the sake of the Gospel (Mark 8:35).

As we gather, the cross, candles, and Gospel book tell us simply and silently what our celebration is about. We are to bring our daily lives of dying and rising and of witness and service to others into the assembly. There we are to join them with Christ. We are reminded through our act of gathering and the entry of our ministers that Christ is in our midst to lead us in the celebration and to nourish us for Christian living at the table of word and Eucharist.

### *Proclaiming and Listening*

In the Liturgy of the Word we listen to the word of God proclaimed for our belief and response. Special reverence is paid to the Gospel book that was carried in. It is again held aloft, acclaimed, and incensed to remind us and to celebrate that Christ speaks to us when the Gospel is proclaimed (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 7; hereafter, SC). So that we can hear the meaning the Scriptures have for our daily lives, the homilist breaks them open for us just as Jesus did in his hometown synagogue when he said "today this passage has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Thus the Gospel is not only the story of what Jesus did and said, it is also to become the story of our lives.

We know, as Cardinal Joseph Bernardin reminds us, that listening is a skill that grows dull in the barrage of words that surrounds us every day.<sup>9</sup> We have learned to turn off our ears. But the art of listening can be relearned. The Liturgy of the Word, Bernardin goes on to say, is a school in which we can learn again the art of listening to the voice of God. What we learn to do in the assembly, we can then do more fully in daily life, listening to the voice of God in the needs of people around us, the needs of our world, and especially the needs of those who are poor and oppressed. It is to their cry that God is particularly attentive, just as we must learn to be. Their cry, however, is often a silent cry drowned out by the din of the world and our preoccupations. At times it is no more than a tiny whispering sound like the prophet Elijah heard outside his cave (1 Kgs 19:12). Listening for the voice of God in daily life is not easy, but it grows with practice. That enables us to return to the assembly and listen more attentively to the word of God proclaimed there, and the cycle continues again in daily life.

## Presenting Gifts

From the Liturgy of the Word the assembly moves to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which consists of the presentation of the gifts, the eucharistic prayer, and Communion. At one level the presentation is simply a practical action, getting the bread and wine to the altar table, but it also has a deeper meaning. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal in no. 73 says, "Even though the faithful no longer bring from their own possessions the bread and wine intended for the liturgy as in the past, nevertheless the rite of carrying up the offerings still retains its force and its spiritual significance." That spiritual meaning is named for us in the prayers that accompany the presentation of the bread and wine:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,  
for through your goodness we have received  
the bread we offer you:  
fruit of the earth and work of human hands,  
it will become for us the bread of life. (Third Edition of  
the Roman Missal, no. 23; hereafter, RM3)

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,  
for through your goodness we have received  
the wine we offer you:  
fruit of the vine and work of human hands,  
it will become our spiritual drink. (RM3 no. 25)

Here bread and wine are identified as gifts of God, gifts of the earth, and the work of human hands—gifts which are destined to become our spiritual food and drink.<sup>10</sup> They are part of what E. C. Miller calls a "dialogue of the gift," which is really a "dialogue of love."<sup>11</sup> Creation is God's act of gift-giving. It includes not only material creation, but humanity's ability to actualize the world's potential and present it back to God as a gift, a gift shared for the good of all. In the presentation of bread and wine, Miller notes, the baptized formally declare their willingness to enter into the dialogue of gift initiated in creation, a dialogue that had lapsed into silence in the fall; we had forgotten who has given us the gift. Bread and wine are ultimately God's gift. They are also the work of human hands. Anthropologists call them condensed symbols. What is condensed in them is all the human labor that has gone into their production. That circle of human labor ripples out to include not only farmers and millers and bakers, but a multitude of other hands that make their work possible. In effect, what we place on the table is all our work, our very lives, and creation itself, as a gift to be offered to God. We are all meant to accompany the gift bearers in the spirit as they walk up the aisle, each carrying that gift in our hands to place it on the altar. The prayer over

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the offerings for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time expresses well the dialogue of the gift that takes place within the rite of presentation:

Receive our oblation, O Lord,  
by which is brought about a glorious exchange,  
that, by offering what you have given,  
we may merit to receive your very self.  
Through Christ our Lord.

## Thanking and Offering

From the presentation of gifts the liturgy moves to the eucharistic prayer. Although this prayer is proclaimed by the presider, it is the prayer of the entire assembly.<sup>12</sup> This is made clear in several ways. The language of the prayer is cast in the first person plural, the preface begins with a dialogue between presider and assembly, the prayer is interspersed with acclamations by the assembly, and it concludes with a great Amen voiced by the assembly to ratify all that has been proclaimed. The first part of the prayer recounts all that God has done for us in creation and salvation, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The prayer sums up that recital of God's saving deeds with the institution narrative. The second part of the prayer voices our response of thankful offering and asks God to continue that saving work, transforming the assembly into the Body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus transformed, we are to continue the work of Christ on earth.

Several elements of this prayer are of great importance for a eucharistic spirituality that can flow out into daily life and shape it. First, the words of institution end with the Lord's command to "Do this in memory of me." This is more than a simple rubrical direction to repeat his supper actions of taking bread and wine, saying the blessing over them, breaking the bread, and giving the bread and

wine to his disciples to eat and drink. He gave new reality and meaning to the bread, naming it his Body “given up for you,” and to the wine, naming it his Blood “poured out for you and for many.” The meaning of his entire life is thus summed up in the death to which he freely commits himself with these words. His life has been one of self-emptying service for the coming of God’s reign, one of total self-giving in love (Phil 2:5-11). That same total giving of self in love is what his followers are to do ever after in memory of him.

Second, the portion of the eucharistic prayer that follows the recital of Christ’s command is a pivotal moment for the assembly. In the implementation and catechesis of the Vatican II reform of the Mass, this has not received the pastoral and catechetical attention it so rightly deserves. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal at no. 79f (also SC 48) says that “in this very memorial, the Church—and in particular the Church here and now gathered—offers in the Holy Spirit the spotless Victim to the Father. The Church’s intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learn to offer themselves ...” The text of Eucharistic Prayer III expresses this beautifully.

Therefore, O Lord, as we celebrate the memorial  
of the saving Passion of your Son,  
his wondrous Resurrection  
and Ascension into heaven,  
and as we look forward to his second coming,  
we offer you in thanksgiving  
his holy and living sacrifice. (RM3 no. 13)

The phrase “living sacrifice” is New Testament language for Christian life (e.g., Rom 12:1). It is at this moment that members of the assembly complete what they began in the presentation of the gifts. They now offer their gift of daily witness and self-giving service in the world, their very lives, as a “holy and living sacrifice” in union with the self-offering of Christ. The eucharistic prayers typically go on to ask God to accept this offering. Vatican II states that

... all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup>

This is why we have gathered: to offer with Christ our lives and our world. This is truly a pivotal moment in

the celebration, one of great significance for connecting Eucharist and daily life.

Third, the eucharistic prayer concludes with the great Amen. Acclaiming it three times focuses our attention on a word said so often in the liturgy that we tend to ignore it. But it is truly a word that defines and sums up the entirety of the liturgy. There is in fact only one Amen that can be said, the Amen that is Christ, who is “the Amen, the true and faithful witness, the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev 3:14). We noted earlier that liturgy is the action of the entire assembly. It must now be added that it is first and foremost the action of Christ, who is the head of the Body that celebrates with him and through him (SC 7). He is the liturgist (*leitourgos*) in the sanctuary not made by human hands (Heb 8:2), where he continues to preside at the heavenly liturgy. It is to that liturgy that we lift up our hearts at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer, in order to join in his Amen. Our liturgical Amen can be no other than that of Christ:

For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (2 Cor 1:20-22)

Note that Yes/Amen in this passage moves in two directions. Jesus is God’s Yes to us and to the world; he is also our Amen to God. If we join him in saying Amen to God in the liturgy, we must also join him in saying God’s Yes to all people and to the world. The liturgical Amen must re-echo in our daily lives of love and self-giving service for all God’s people.

## Receiving

To bring the Liturgy of the Eucharist to completion, the assembly recites the Lord’s Prayer and exchanges a sign of peace. The bread is broken and all are invited to come to the table to receive Holy Communion.

There are deep levels of meaning in the breaking and sharing of the bread. To take our daily share of bread, break it, and hand it to others to eat is to break the attraction between our body and the bread meant for it. We postpone our own nourishment and put our lives on hold for the sake of the life of another.<sup>14</sup> Life given for the life of another—that is the heart of Christ’s sacrifice expressed and enacted in the simple act of breaking and sharing the eucharistic bread. What Christ did, we are to do. To the words, “The Body of Christ,” we answer “Amen.” Following the thought of St. Paul (1 Cor 11-12), St. Augustine reminds us that this is a double Amen,

both to the Body of Christ given to us sacramentally and to the Body of Christ that is the church.<sup>15</sup> In saying this Amen to the one who is the Bread of Life, we also commit ourselves to being and living as the Body of Christ in the world, to being bread for others.

The liturgical dialogue of the gift reaches fulfillment in the act of communion. In response to God's gift of creation, we have brought our work, our lives, and our world to the table in the presentation of the gifts. In the eucharistic prayer we have celebrated the memorial of God's gift of salvation to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and in response we then offered to God the gift of ourselves in union with Christ's self-gift. The liturgical dialogue of the gift between God and us reaches fulfillment and is sealed in the act of communion, in which "each give[s] the self to the other."<sup>16</sup> And so, in the prayer after communion for Thursday within the octave of Easter we pray:

Hear, O Lord, our prayers,  
that this most holy exchange,  
by which you have redeemed us,  
may bring your help in this present life  
and ensure for us eternal gladness.  
Through Christ our Lord.

This holy exchange of receiving and giving is not meant to end here, however. It ought to spiral out into our daily lives and expand to draw in those around us. The example of the early church is instructive. St. Justin the Martyr recounts that the collection was taken up after Communion and used for widows, orphans, prisoners, strangers, and all those in need.<sup>17</sup> A dim memory of this early practice is enshrined in our current directive for the eucharistic celebration on Holy Thursday evening. If a collection is taken up, we are told, it is to be used only for those in need and not for the support of the local community, as on other days of the year. The dialogue of the gift can not be a closed circle; it must spiral out beyond the celebration. That is why the assembly is sent from Communion back into lives of self-giving love and service in the world.

### ***Sending***

The concluding rite is brief and deceptively simple: a greeting, the final blessing, and the dismissal to which the assembly responds "Thanks be to God." The meaning of the dismissal, however, runs far deeper.

Cardinal Bernardin comments in a wonderful mystical turn of phrase:

The dismissal of the assembly is like the breaking of the

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bread. We have become "the bread of life" and the "cup of blessing" for the world. Now we are scattered, broken, poured out to be life for the world. What happens at home, at work, at meals? What do we make of our time, our words, our deeds, our resources of all kinds? That is what matters.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein John Paul II has written, "The dismissal at the end of each Mass is a *charge* given to Christians, inviting them to work for the spread of the Gospel and the imbuing of society with Christian values."<sup>19</sup>

The Latin for the dismissal, *Ite, missa est*, can be translated either as the traditional "Go, the Mass is ended" or as the more literal "Go, you are sent." Choosing the latter rendition, Benedict XVI has written, "These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church's life, taking the dismissal as a starting-point."<sup>20</sup> Two versions of the dismissal newly added in the revised Roman Missal also stress this missionary function: "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord," and "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." In the words of a faculty colleague, Anthony J. Gittins, disciples are those who are called to

be sent, who are co-missioned along with Jesus, who was sent to bring into the world the total and unconditional self-giving love of God.<sup>21</sup>

The primary mission on which disciples are sent at the conclusion of each eucharistic celebration has been described in church documents as “silent proclamation” of the Gospel by the witness of their lives. In an apostolic exhortation of 1975, Paul VI gave a stirring description of how this silent proclamation is carried out:

Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization.<sup>22</sup>

The liturgical dismissal, then, sends us back into our life-mission, what Ion Bria has called “the liturgy after the liturgy”<sup>23</sup> or others, “the liturgy of the neighbor.” It is that liturgy from which we return and which we bring back to the Liturgy of the Eucharist when we gather again. Reflecting on the words of Pope Benedict cited above, Gregory Pierce counsels us to think of the gathering not simply as a coming together, but rather as a return from mission.<sup>24</sup> With that, the cycle between liturgy and life is completed, a cycle (or better, a spiral) ready to be repeated again and again. Surely, then, the gathering and sending rites, the indispensable liturgical bridge by which we move back and forth between liturgy and Christian life, deserve our full pastoral care.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Adjustment to the Third Edition of the Roman Missal will require time, patience, and thoughtful pastoral care. Clear instruction about the changes is certainly in order. Beneath the surface changes, however, the deeper mystery that we celebrate in the Eucharist remains the same and merits the best mystagogical reflection we can offer our people. They deserve no less, for it is that reflection that will feed their spiritual hunger to understand the inner meaning of the Eucharist and to put it into practice in their daily lives.

1. For the complete NCCB list of the changes in the parts of people, see: <http://www.catholic-church.org/st.paulcathedralpgh/Roman%20Missal%20Peoples%20Parts.pdf>; accessed 6-30-2011.
2. For example, Paul Turner, *Understanding the Revised Mass Texts* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2011).
3. See David N. Power, “Interpreting Eucharistic Prayers: An Excursus,” and his commentaries on Eucharistic Prayers I-IV of the revised Roman Missal, in Edward Foley, et al., eds., *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of The Roman Missal: A New English Translation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).
4. The National Liturgy Office of the CCCB produced a two-hour DVD presentation on the theological emphases of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal [for information see <http://nlo.cccb.ca/index.php/roman-missal>; accessed 6-30-2011].
5. For an extended discussion see Mary Collins and Edward Foley, “Mystagogy: Discerning the Mystery of Faith” in Foley, et al., eds., *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of The Roman Missal*.
6. See Cardinal Roger Mahony, *Gather Faithfully Together: Guide for Sunday Mass*, 13-14 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997).
7. As imaged in a beautiful medieval crucifix in the Perugia art museum.
8. Karl Rahner, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event” in his *Theological Investigations XIV*, transl. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), 161-84.
9. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *Guide for the Assembly* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997) no. 37, pp. 11-12.
10. This paragraph is taken, with slight modifications, from an article I have written for the *Dictionary of the Passion*, to be published in Italian by Città Nuova.
11. E. C. Miller, “Presentation of Gifts: Orthodox Insights for Western Liturgical Renewal,” *Worship* 60 (1986): 22-38, quoting Dumitru Staniloae.
12. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1144 and 1188 note that the entire assembly is the subject (*leitourgia*) of the liturgy.
13. Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 34. Online at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html); accessed 6-30-2011.
14. This reflection is drawn from Edmund Barbotin, *The Humanity of Man*, transl. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1975) 378-79.
15. St. Augustine, Sermon 272.
16. Miller, “Presentation of Gifts,” 36
17. Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 67 (c. 150).
18. Bernardin, *Guide for the Assembly* no. 79, p. 23.
19. John Paul II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*, no. 24 (emphasis original). Online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20041008\\_mane-nobiscum-domine\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20041008_mane-nobiscum-domine_en.html); accessed 7-2-2011.
20. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, no. 51. Online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20070222\\_sacramentum-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html); accessed 7-2-2011.
21. See Anthony J. Gittins, *Called to Be Sent: Co-Missioned as Disciples Today* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publ., 2008).
22. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 21. Online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html) accessed 6-30-2011; accessed 7-2-2011.
23. Ion Bria, “The Liturgy after the Liturgy.” Online at: [http://www.rondtb.msk.ru/info/en/Bria\\_en.htm](http://www.rondtb.msk.ru/info/en/Bria_en.htm); accessed 7-2-2011; also *The Liturgy after the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, 19-35 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996).
24. Gregory F. Augustine Pierce, *The Mass Is Never Ended: Rediscovering Our Mission to Transform the World* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2007) 42-43.
25. For example, would it not make sense to enshrine cross, candles, and Gospel book in the narthex for people to venerate both as they enter the assembly to celebrate Eucharist and as they are sent from it to go back out on mission?