

The Source and Summit of Christian Life No. 3

Last week we saw how when we come together we are to welcome each other in a way that recognises the presence of Christ in each of us as we gather for worship. With this in mind we can now move on to look carefully at the start of our liturgy.

First we have the opening hymn which takes the place of the Entrance Antiphon set in the missal. As such, like all the hymns, it takes the place of Antiphons in the missal and is used to accompany a procession. One of the key functions of our singing together is to enable us to express our unity in Christ. Another function of the opening song is to proclaim the focus of the celebration or the season of the liturgical year. It, as it were, sets the theme for the rest of the liturgy. We stand to sing of course because as standing physically expresses our unity much more than any other posture.

After the opening song we remain standing for the Introductory Rites. The greeting at the beginning of the liturgy is drawn from scripture so it certainly should not be replaced by a more casual language. This is usually followed by some introductory words from the presiding priest to set the theme for the Mass and to invite the assembly to a short time of silence. The penitential rite which follows the silence can easily be misunderstood. It is not really be a recalling of our sinfulness to make us feel filled with guilt and self concern. The proper function of this brief ritual is to remind us of the great mercy of God which, in itself, is a good reason for celebration and thanksgiving. It is not a quick substitute for the sacrament of reconciliation and so it is inappropriate to make the sign of the cross during the Presider's prayer. This penitential rite however is sometimes replaced with the sprinkling rite which is especially suitable during the Easter season. Although it is clearly a reminder of our baptism this is highlighted by singing a suitable song or antiphon during the sprinkling.

The Glory to God is sung on most Sundays and feasts. If the mass includes any singing at all this is one of the parts that must be sung. It is also extremely important to use the actual text in the missal rather than some other adaptation.

Probably the most important element in the introductory rites is the opening prayer or to give it the official title; the Prayer of the Day. It is almost certainly the oldest part of these rites going back to the very earliest times of Christianity. After the Presider says, "Let us pray" there is to be a time of silence to allow the people to do just that in the silence (the guidebooks recommend that this should be about a minute!) The Presider then says or sings the prayer of the day which collects up all the silent prayers into one. All make this prayer their own by all saying or singing "Amen." This is another powerful reminder that we are all called to pray the liturgy and not be just attending it.

So you can see how important these little rites are in setting the whole atmosphere for surrendering to God's love in the following liturgy of the Word and in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you explain the importance of the introductory rites to someone?
2. How would you explain the importance of the opening song?

3. Do you think the way we do these rites help us to be aware that we are the faithful people of God ready and open to hearing God's Word to us?
4. Do you notice the variation in these rites for the different liturgical seasons?
5. Can you suggest ways that these rites could be more effective?