

## **The Source and Summit of Christian Life No. 7**

We now move on to the Liturgy of the Eucharist and first we remember that the mass has two integrated dimensions. It is a meal but also a sacrifice. We should recall of course that there is only one acceptable sacrifice made for all time, so the Mass must be a participation in this one ongoing sacrifice of Christ. To share in the sacrifice of Christ we must surrender ourselves to God just as Jesus did. In this way we share his sacrificial act and are caught up in him. Pope John Paul II expressed this well in *Dies Domini*:

*In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering and so acquire a new value.*

We begin this section of our Mass with the Preparation of the Gifts (often misnamed as the offertory). It consists simply in bringing the gifts of bread and wine forward to the presiding priest who then places them on the altar. This procession with the gifts is usually accompanied with a hymn. The priest will then use the gifts to prepare the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer. He will say two blessing prayers for the bread and wine which can either be said aloud or silently. The preparation of the gifts offers the assembly an opportunity to move more deeply into the meaning of the Eucharistic liturgy. It provides a pause between the intensity of the Liturgy of the Word and the grandeur of the Eucharistic prayer and it allows the assembly time to take a breath as they prepare to enter into full participation with the great prayer to follow. The priest then invites the assembly to join in the offering before he says an ancient prayer over the gifts.

The Eucharistic prayer begins with the people standing for an opening dialogue which concludes with the great song of the angels which should always be sung when there is singing at the mass. The people then kneel although originally the rubrics required them to stand

throughout the whole prayer. The Eucharistic Prayer itself is often seen as simply the prayer of the priest, rather than a prayer that the priest speaks in the name of the whole community. As the word Eucharist implies the whole prayer is one of giving thanks and praise. The whole of the prayer effects the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ and not just the words taken from the Last Supper. It is important to remember that it is in response to the prayer of the whole people that the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. It is important therefore that all the people should be fully attentive and participating by watching the action at the altar and by hearing the words. It is not really a time to have one's head bowed. At the elevations of the bread and cup the people should look up in adoration and thanksgiving at this great opportunity to be united with Christ. This is emphasised by the three memorial acclamations which, like the gospel acclamation, should always be sung. The prayer ends with a great Amen that again should be sung loudly by all the people.

It is worth remembering some words of St. Thomas Aquinas who 'in the thirteenth century' made it quite clear that the ultimate purpose of the Eucharist is not to transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, although it certainly does that, but to unify the church through the Body and Blood. The purpose of the Eucharist is not just to transform bread and wine but to transform us all into the living body of Christ.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. As Catholics we have long called the Mass a sacrifice. How would you explain this to a non-catholic?
2. What strikes you about the way we perform the procession with the gifts and the preparation of the altar?
3. How can we better understand that the Eucharistic Prayer is the prayer of the whole assembly and not just the prayer of the priest?