

Homily for May 28, 2000
Sixth Sunday of Easter Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
1 John 4:7-10
John 15:9-17

God makes his choice of us and so we give thanks and praise.

Every Lord's Day, the church assembles here in its house and processes into its liturgy. That procession we talked about a few weeks ago. There is our gathering together, song, the Sign of the Cross, greeting, prayer. It takes a while to give us a sense of being here not as so many individuals, but as the baptized people who are the church.

When this church has so prepared itself, we open our book and read the scriptures, sing psalms and alleluias, listen to the homily and join in the prayers of intercession. Those prayers conclude what is really a whole liturgy in itself, the liturgy of the word. But from the earliest times, Christians have had another liturgy that has been bound to their keeping of the Lord's day. That is the liturgy of the eucharist. "Eucharist" is a word that comes from Greek and has to do with "giving thanks," with "praise" and with "blessing."

But eucharist begins quietly. We need that. We have just finished what ought to be hard work; concentrating on the scripture and on making prayers of intercession takes energy and leaves us both lifted up and a little worn out. So we take quiet moments to get the room and ourselves ready for eucharist. This is

the time called the preparation of the gifts - the bringing up of the bread and wine and money I spoke of last week. I say it's a quiet time - not because there's strict silence, but a kind of pause in the action, music less intense - some silence maybe. Remember, silence during mass, is not an accident but for a purpose. During the silence at mass either we pray or we get bored, antsy maybe - so foreign is it and so much do we need it. We bring forward the bread and the wine and the money - the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands. All that makes us one and bound up to one another - our fortunes are shared and our need for support of the poor and of this institution all are wrapped up in these great symbols. Our life is intimately connected to the whole world, and bread and wine and money show this.

When all is ready, we stand up. In fact, we stand and gather around the table; only our numbers in this room keep us from coming into a circle. In smaller gatherings on occasion we can do that. The one presiding stands at the table also and says four words to us that are not so much an invitation as an order: "Lift up your hearts." It's an order, like Jesus' order to his disciples in John 15 today: "Love one another as I have loved you." It's an order, not an option. Some remember the Latin where it was only two words: "Sursum corda!" "Hearts on high!" we might say. And we answer that we are ready for this: "We lift them up to the Lord." Then the presider gives the invitation to do

that deed that is the very heart not of the liturgy only, but of Christian life: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." And we sing: "It is right to give God thanks and praise." All right. Yes! It is. Giving thanks. Giving praise. That's the heart of things for us. Are we any good at it? Probably we are better at asking God, better at saying we're sorry, better at almost anything than this.

How do we think about those next few minutes? What do we think happens between this invitation and the Lord's prayer just moments later? Some would say: "A lot of words by the priest while we all kneel down and pray." Others would say, "The priest consecrates the bread and wine." But there is a problem with answers like these. It still seems like we become a very passive audience right at the moment we are supposed to be most active. The prayer that the presider speaks is the prayer of the church, our prayer. We show this when we sing those acclamations: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might," and "Christ has died, Christ is risen," and the great Amen that we sing at the end of this prayer. All of those are shouts of approval, commands to go ahead with this prayer. They are like bursts of single-hearted songs. ...And if we weren't all here together saying that, the priest really isn't even supposed to say the prayer.

Or are they really bursts of single-hearted song? Sometimes they are not. Part of that may be our fault, part the presider's fault, part the fault of words that are not strong enough to bear the burden here, and part the fault of music that just doesn't get the job done for us. All of those can be improved - and new prayers are being drafted and a new sacramentary is on the way. The eucharistic prayer we use with children has a lot more acclamations. Actually our failure to make these moments the high point of the liturgy shows that the liturgy is very human. It isn't magic. It's not perfect and needs to get better. From the presider's side, it takes great strength to lead the Eucharistic Prayer well, singing and speaking a long prayer to God and the name of this assembly. A

person can't do that without sensing that the assembly is attentive, is wanting to give thanks and praise.

That back and forth between the leader of the prayer and the ones praying is crucial. Posture, eyes, readiness to sing those acclamations - all these count. Despite an unfortunate distance between the leader and the assembly, we can get rid of all papers and books and have eyes and all senses toward the table. We can sing out, by heart, the "Holy, holy" and the other acclamations. Though the spoken words of the prayer are familiar, we can try to hear them and make them our own prayer so that our "Amen" is real at the end - notice it takes effort and work to listen and participate. No spectators, no passive people here.

Though there are in English more than nine different forms that this prayer can take, each weaves together some common strands. Most obvious: this is a meal prayer. God is given all thanks and praise, not in the abstract, but at a table on which are the bread and wine intended for the food and drink of this assembly. So this prayer echoes with all the meal blessings we say in our lives. We grow hungry and by God's grace are fed. All that we know about giving thanks we bring to this table. Over the bread and wine the presider puts words to our thanks and they become words about Christ. All our thanks gravitate toward the body given up for the life of the world, toward the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, blood that was shed for all that sins might be forgiven. We call on the Holy Spirit to descend on these gifts and make them holy, make them for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

If we Catholics want to learn how to pray, then let us learn how to pray the Eucharistic Prayer. Learn how to lift up our hearts and give God thanks and praise. Learn it here, at this table, gathered close to one another, gazing at simple bread and good wine.

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