

# The Three New Eucharistic Prayers

by Paulinus Milner, O.P.

The decree *Prece eucharistica* of 23rd May ushers in what will be the most striking and the most effective of all the changes in the Mass. The recital out loud and in the vernacular of the canon of the Mass has made many aware of the defects and poverty of this ancient Roman prayer. The latest reform makes good some of these defects of the Roman formula by adding eight new prefaces to the existing collection in the missal: two of these are for Advent, one for the Sundays in Lent, two for Sundays throughout the year to avoid the repetition of the special preface for the feast of the Trinity, a new preface of the Blessed Sacrament and two new common prefaces. All these will help to add variety and to restore the element of thanksgiving for God's wonderful works, which should be the essence of every eucharistic prayer, but which is so lacking at present.

A more radical remedy, however, is the promulgation of three completely new eucharistic prayers which may entirely replace the Roman canon except on certain occasions. Two of these new prayers may be combined with the variable prefaces according to the season and thus the central prayer of the Mass will once again take on some of the variety it had in the early centuries of the Church and which is still maintained to a certain extent by the Eastern Churches.

The eucharistic prayer of the Mass has developed from the prayer of thanksgiving which Christ, like the father of every Jewish family made over the bread before the meal and over the cup at its end. It was a prayer in which God was praised and his wonderful works recounted. The actual words in which this was done were left to the inspiration of the one who made the prayer. Even up to the fourth century such freedom was still exercised by bishops and priests of the Christian Church. But from the end of that century the prayers composed by certain great bishops began to be used more and more widely and became the fixed formulas of the different churches, though many churches used more than one. These prayers frequently contained an admirable summary of the whole of Christian doctrine as they recounted the various acts of God for the salvation of man; thus the rule of true faith was formed in the minds of the people as they listened and associated themselves with the thanksgiving of the priest. The new eucharistic prayers restore this important didactic aspect of Christian worship which has been obscured for so long in the desire for sacred mumbling.

The plan of the eucharistic prayers differs from church to church.

The Roman canon with its long lists of saints and intercessions both before and after the consecration is the most complicated and difficult to follow. The simplest plan is that of the prayers used in the patriarchate of Antioch. These began with the expression of the praise of God and continued with the enumeration of his great works for salvation, and it was among these and as a climax to them that the account of the Last Supper was included. Once this great anamnesis was finished, the bread and wine were offered to God and he was asked to send his Holy Spirit upon the offerings that they might become the body and blood of Christ, and that all might make a fruitful communion. The various intercessions and commemorations followed and the whole was terminated with the doxology.

In view of this diversity the *Consilium for the Liturgy* was faced with a difficult problem: what order were the new prayers to have? It would be too confusing if each were to have a different plan and perhaps the Antiochene plan would give rise to doctrinal difficulties in minds accustomed to western eucharistic theology. They therefore decided to adopt a uniform plan for all three which would be similar to that of some of the Alexandrian prayers. The prayer for the consecration of the bread and wine (consecratory *epiclesis*) would precede the account of the Last Supper and the intercessions and commemorations would come at the end just before the doxology. The new prayers, therefore, comprise the following elements:

- (a) Preface—prayer of praise and thanksgiving variable in prayers II and III but fixed in prayer IV—terminating in the *Sanctus*.
- (b) Passage from the *Sanctus* to the consecratory *epiclesis* which in prayer III is short and in prayer II very short but in prayer IV is quite long.
- (c) The account of the Last Supper followed by general acclamation.
- (d) Commemoration of the death and the whole mystery of Christ as the gifts are offered to God.
- (e) Communion *epiclesis*—a prayer for the acceptance of the offering and a fruitful communion.
- (f) Commemoration of the saints and intercessions.
- (g) Final doxology.

The first of the new prayers (called eucharistic prayer II since the Roman canon is eucharistic prayer I) is largely inspired by the third-century prayer of Hippolytus. It should have been possible to treat this beautiful prayer with greater respect, nevertheless many will be pleased to have its fine vigorous phrases incorporated into the new prayer. It has a fixed preface of its own but may also be used with any of the variable prefaces. It is very short and most suitable for less solemn occasions.

The second prayer is a much shortened form of the prayer

composed by Fr Cipriano Vagaggini and published in his book *The Canon of the Mass and Liturgical Reform*. It is designed to be used with the variable prefaces of the missal. The communion *epiclesis* which prays that the Holy Spirit may make us an everlasting gift to God, one body and one spirit in Christ, is particularly beautiful. It also has a special intercession for the dead in which the names of particular deceased can be inserted.

The longest and most solemn of the three, and perhaps the most beautiful, is the eucharistic prayer IV. Its preface is fixed and after the *sanctus* it has a long development on the history of salvation starting from the creation and ending with Christ. This is not a prayer for everyday use but its didactic effect should be very great.

There can be no doubt of the importance of this step in the liturgical reform. After perhaps an initial shock in some quarters these prayers will be warmly received and the generation which grows up listening to them will receive a better formation in the essentials of Christianity than their parents could receive from the liturgy. But once the Western Church has become accustomed to a variety of eucharistic prayers and priests have learnt the form such prayers should take, it is to be hoped that greater freedom of composition will be allowed. Fine as they are, these prayers are not suited to every occasion. There remains a need for prayers which are closer to the expression and Christian preoccupations of modern man, and there are surely circumstances in which improvisation would be better than any set formula.

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COMMENT (Continued from page 5)

new names and new styles were coming forth: Kenelm Foster, Illtud Evans, Laurence Bright, Cornelius Ernst, Herbert McCabe, O.P. . . .

And these are only a few, amongst the many 'of whom there is no memorial': quite apart from the brothers, and the sisters, of the first and second Orders, all silent, yet serving, too. Not to speak of the convulsive ravages of the past few years.

Where, then, do we stand, and where stands St Thomas? At another juncture, no doubt. And here we can do worse than to return to the opening quotation of an early article by Gerald Vann and ponder its truth:

The desire for order is a primary need of our nature, of our minds and bodies. . . . In the sphere of society man desires primarily a clear order, the deep satisfaction of knowing himself bound up with that which is moving to some defined end (October, 1933, p. 860).

Could we say that the clarification of that order and the making of that society constitutes *our* commitment to the aim of truth today?

P.L.