

# How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

## *The Eucharistic Prayer*



Office of  
Evangelization and Worship

Many U.S. Catholics who grew up in what we today often refer to as the “pre-Vatican II Church” have memories of our “Sunday habits,” some of which may not have been all that praise-worthy. We had a tendency in those days, for instance, to use the law to “cut the edges” of the practice of our faith.

“At what precise moment does Friday abstinence from meat begin and end?” “When are you late for Mass?” This was the most frequently asked question and it may already have been a search for a simple and convenient answer. Unfortunately, the answer we often were given with regard to Mass attendance was the “bottom line” answer. If you were in the door by the time of the Offertory or, for sure, the Consecration of the Mass, you were safe. No sin incurred! That is what we today would call a “minimalist” approach, namely, getting by with the least amount of risk while being assured that we were still “faithful” Catholics.

Of course, that answer also gives one the impression that other parts of the Mass were considered less important, particularly the Liturgy of the Word, the opening rites, the Rite of Penitence, the proclamation of the scriptures, the homily, et cetera. What was important was the fulfilling of one’s obligation. In that regard, the Consecration was once considered the “dividing point” between having “attended Mass” and not having “attended Mass.” Hopefully, that attitude among Catholics has long since faded into history.

Today, we would insist that the entire Mass, although it is divided between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is a united whole; the entire Liturgy is important, not simply the Consecration. If one is not present today for the entrance or processional song, we are already considered “late.” If we leave before our sisters and brothers have received communion with us, we have “left early.”

That is not to say, of course, that the Consecration is unimportant. Rather, it is part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Let us say something, therefore, about that very important part of our Roman liturgy which includes the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite.



We pray that we will be transformed into  
Christ's Body and Blood for the life of the world.

The first question to ask, therefore, is this: What did Christ say and do at the Last Supper? The words are these: "For Christ took the bread and the chalice and gave thanks; he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take, eat and drink: This is my body, this is my blood. Do this in memory of me." (GIRM # 72) Over the centuries, of course, indeed, even from the earliest times, the Church has added certain prayers both before and after the words of Consecration. However, the basic structure of the Eucharistic Prayer is: "Take, give thanks, break and pour, eat and drink." This is what we all do at Mass as believers, baptized in Christ

The Eucharistic Prayer, therefore, is a prayer of praise and thanks to God for the work of our salvation and especially for the gift and sacrifice of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The offerings of bread and wine, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. And we too pray that we will be transformed into Christ's Body and Blood for the life of the world.

Realistically, however, we must also say that it often seems as though we do not pray together at the Eucharistic Prayer. It appears to the assembly that this is the "priest's prayer," inasmuch as the priest by himself prays the words.

If we pay careful attention to the words, however, it will become clear that the priest prays on behalf of all of us. Listen, for instance, to the number of times the word "we" is repeated in the Eucharistic Prayer: "We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving." "We offer these gifts for your holy Catholic Church." "Remember all of us gathered here before you." "We offer you this sacrifice of praise." "We celebrate the memory of Christ your Son." "For ourselves too we ask some share in the fellowship of the saints."

It seems clear, therefore, that we are all included in the prayer of the priest. It is not a time for us to sit back and wait for it all to be finished. Our attention is important and our participation in the dialogue with the priest as well.

We would consider ourselves "late" if we came into the theater at the beginning of the second act. We wouldn't even think of coming late to an opera or a symphony. Then why come to Mass late? It would also be considered rude to leave before the final act or the concluding notes of the orchestra. Interestingly, we normally consider ourselves participants in an opera or a concert if we try to follow the words and the music. So it is with the Liturgy. It asks for our "full, conscious and active participation." No one arrives late or leaves early.