

## THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER PART ONE: THE ACTION OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

**Center and Summit:** The Eucharistic Prayer or Canon of the Mass is the center and summit of the entire celebration. This prayer begins with the dialogue between priest and people that introduces the Preface and ends with the great AMEN. The term Eucharist is a Greek word meaning thanksgiving and praise. It is this word which gives the prayer its name, for praise and thanks given to God to which is added Christ's sacrificial offering of himself, the perfect act of praise, are the essence of the Eucharistic Prayer.

For some time, beginning in the seventh century, the canon was prayed silently by the priest and this contributed to the impression that, because of its great holiness, the Eucharistic Prayer belonged only to those who were ordained and not to ordinary people. In the last two centuries, however, research into the theology and practice of the early Church brought to light the theological teaching that all those who are baptized receive at Baptism a share in the priesthood of Christ. According to the *Constitution on the Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council, this baptismal priesthood makes full participation in the liturgy of the Church both the right and the duty of all the baptized. The concept of the priesthood of the baptized does not, however, detract from the ordained priesthood. The priest, the ordained minister, is essential to the celebration of the liturgy for his ordination gives him the special character that enables him at the liturgy to act in the person of Christ. The liturgy, therefore, involves the whole Mystical Body, the whole Church: Christ, the head, represented on earth by the priest who acts in Christ's person, and the members, all of us who, by baptism, share the life of Christ.

**The Action of Christ and His Church:** What are some implications of this for the role of the baptized during the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass? The Church tells us that liturgy (and the Mass is the

highpoint and heart of liturgy) is the action of Christ the Priest and his Body, which is the Church. While most Catholics have been taught from their earliest days that during the Eucharistic Prayer the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, many are not aware that the action to which we are called in the Eucharistic Prayer is about more than adoring Christ who becomes present in our midst. In the celebration of Mass, during the Eucharistic Prayer, not only does Christ become present, body and blood, soul and divinity, under the forms of bread and wine, but Christ's saving action, His passion, death and resurrection are once again enacted and offered to the Father by Christ Himself in the person of the priest, and by all present.

For this reason, the Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to the Father. Read carefully any of the Eucharistic Prayers. You will see that each is offered, not to Christ, but to the Father: "Father, you are holy indeed ..."; "Father, we bring you these gifts ..."; "Father, we ask you..." It is worship offered to the Father by Christ, in the Holy Spirit just as it was at the moment of His passion, death and resurrection. As Pope John Paul II has told us, *Christ's gift of love and obedience to the point of giving his life is first and foremost a gift to the Father. [Ecclesia de Eucharistia, n. 13]* And it is this gift to the Father, Christ's obedience unto death, this perfect sacrifice, that becomes present in our midst, and that we too are privileged to offer. This is a truth of enormous significance! This action of Christ which brought about our redemption from sin and eternal death, the action which he offered once for all on Calvary, becomes present again for us, here and now, in this time and place. What is more, the presence of this saving action gives us the opportunity to become part of Christ's perfect offering, allowing us to participate in Christ's perfect worship of the Father. This is the action of Christ's Body, the Church at Mass.