The Liturgy of the Eucharist

I am not going to ask for a show of hands, but I am going to begin by assuming that most of us have been distracted at Mass at least once or twice before. Maybe even already today! That can happen so easily. It’s part of human nature. If we don’t fully understand what is going on, then naturally our distractions will take us outside the action, to things that may have nothing to do with what is taking place right here.

Now I realize that where I am about to go may be pretty far from your usual experience of Mass. But if taking a deeper look at the ideal helps us all have a clearer appreciation of what happens when we celebrate the Eucharist, then sometimes we might get distracted INTO the mystery of the Mass rather than away from it. That would certainly be a blessing!

Last week, after exploring how the Liturgy of the Word can feed the hungers we bring to Mass, I promised that this week we would look into the second half of Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Since it is impossible to cover it all, here is how we’ll approach it. First, let’s explore why Eucharist is called a mystery. Then, let’s just look at a partial list of the cast of characters during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and who does what.

When we speak of preparing to celebrate the sacred mysteries, we aren’t using the word mystery in the same way that we might every day, as when I might say to someone: “I don’t know, it’s all a mystery to me.” When we speak of the mystery of the cross, as St. Paul often did, or the mystery of the Eucharist, we don’t mean ‘I have no idea.’ What we mean is, there is something concrete, something visible in this real world. But within it, something deeper is hidden: God’s love made real. A divine reality.

Anyone can see the concrete, visible part of the mystery. A crucifix. What we do and say when we celebrate Mass, or when we gather around the font for a baptism. But when the Holy Spirit opens our mind, our eyes, and our heart to see beyond just the external, we have access to the hidden part. We encounter God and God’s grace. We brush up against the divine. Mysteries include something external, and something internal, hidden within. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can recognize that internal gift, experience God’s love as a result. Every sacrament is a mystery in this sense.

Now, on to the cast of characters, especially in the second half of Mass. The first big question: If the Mass were a play, who is the main actor? Our answer has a tremendous impact on what we will experience when we come together. So, who is the main actor at Mass? Looking to the invisible, hidden reality provides the real answer. God, though Christ, and in the Holy Spirit is actually the central character. There may be a presider who appears center stage; that is the concrete, visible part of the mystery. But it is really Christ, who was sent by the Father, acting through the presider, in the power of the Spirit who offers himself to the Father every time we celebrate Mass. I suppose that bears repeating. It is really Christ, who was sent by the Father, acting through the presider, in the power of the Spirit who offers himself to the Father every time we celebrate Mass. Mass isn’t nearly so much about what we do as about what God does when we come together for Eucharist.
Back to the cast of characters: some of the vital actors can go unnoticed if we aren’t tuned in, for instance, the folks bringing up the gifts, the bread & wine. They are friends, family members, neighbors, fellow parishioners. That’s the visible part. A hidden part that the Holy Spirit can reveal? This isn’t just a break from the real action, to get the bread and wine from the back of the church to the front. Those bringing up the gifts are just like the disciples Jesus sent out to prepare a room for the Last Supper. They are the little boy on the hillside with the two loaves and three fishes at the multiplication of the loaves. They also represent each one of us, bringing the little we have to the Lord, so that the Lord can take what we offer, bless it, and transform it, so that there is enough to provide for everyone, with more than enough left over.

By the way, the bread and wine aren’t just bread and wine either, even before the consecration. People put hours into growing wheat, grinding it, baking bread; growing grapes, harvesting them, making and aging wine. The bread and wine represent our work, our family life, and ultimately you and me.

Truth be known, some great spiritual writers would go farther, and say that we are called to bring everyone, the whole world to the altar.

At any rate, Jesus offered his life, and as disciples, we do our best to do the same. “Here I am, Lord” isn’t just a pretty song. It should be our disposition at this point in the Mass, as symbolically we place ourselves on the altar. That is the hidden part, made possible through the visible part, our offerings, and the gifts of bread and wine. Taking up the collection and bringing up the gifts isn’t just something we have to do --it is a spiritual part of the mystery of the Eucharist. Our offerings give Christ something to work with. Think about it.

More characters in the holy drama? There are those present here in church, including every single one of you, our musicians, altar servers, sometimes a deacon – that is the visible part that anyone can see. With eyes of faith, we are the disciples, gathered with Jesus on the hillside. Disciples at the many other meals we find in the Gospels. Most especially, when we enter into the mystery of the Eucharist, we are around the table at the last supper.

Singing the ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ brings other characters to the fore. Visibly, it is Stephanie, our cantor, perhaps the choir, and all of us singing. But we are just joining in. The lead singers are the angels before the throne of God, singing the same song Isaiah heard in his inaugural vision. Saints are leading the singing as well, as John saw in his visions, writing to us about the saints singing around the throne. When we invite the saints to pray for us through the Litany of Saints at a Baptism, we are simply acknowledging and encouraging what they always do: pray with us, for us, and intercede on our behalf.

It would be a travesty not to single out a divine character present throughout, who is center stage twice during the liturgy of the Eucharist. The presider invites the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. For those wanting a great technical word, calling down the Holy Spirit is called the epiclesis. But most importantly, we do it twice. Not only does the Holy Spirit transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Holy Spirit is called upon a second time after the consecration. Here is a really important thing that is hidden within something visible. After the consecration, the Holy Spirit is called upon to
bring about another transformation, one that is nothing short of a miracle. We are transformed from an ordinary, everyday group of folks into the church, that is, the Body of Christ. Yes, it isn't just the bread and wine that God intends to transform when we gather for Mass. It is us as well. Transformed, and then sent back into the world. “Go, glorifying the Lord with your life.”

Well, time is almost up, and I feel like we’ve just scratched the surface. So many things we haven’t even touched. But going for depth rather than breadth, let me call in reinforcements. To amplify that last point, let me quote from my friend St. Augustine, when he was preaching about the Eucharist:

*So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking to the faithful: "You are the body of Christ, member for member." [1 Cor. 12.27] If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying "Amen" to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear "The body of Christ", you reply "Amen." Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your "Amen" may ring true!*

Let me conclude with the closing of Mass. You know when I conclude with the blessing that begins “May the Lord support you all the day long…”? I look out, love filling my heart, and I say: “My people, God’s good people, may he bless you, God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” God having transformed me through the Eucharist, at that point my heart is overflowing not just with my love, but with divine love. I am filled with joy as well that I can call you my people. But the real speaker is Christ. He is the one blessing you, calling you His people, God’s good people. I’m just incredibly grateful he allows me to speak on his behalf.

*Not to us, not to us O Lord, but to you name give glory.*

*Non nobis Domine, Domine, non nobis Domine, sed nomini, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.*