

Homily - 5th Catechesis on the Mass

This weekend we are going to cover what the Church calls: the “introductory rites” of the Mass. In the bulletin I speak about the reverencing of the altar by the priest and deacon and the gesture of the sign of the Cross. Last week I spoke of the ‘greeting,’ and today I will speak on the “penitential rite,” “the Gloria,” and the “opening prayer.”

Penitential Rite - begins with: “I confess . . .” Like the people of Israel in the desert, like David after his fall with Bathsheba, like all the sinners coming to John the Baptist in the Jordan, like Peter before Christ--we too confess and acknowledge our sinfulness that has made us unworthy to come before God. And following St. James’ exhortation, we confess our sins not only to God, but also to each other, our “brothers and sisters.”

What do we confess? There are 4 general areas where we sin: “in our thoughts” (Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that we can commit murder and adultery by thoughts of hatred and lust in our own hearts) . . . “in our words” (for example, using the Lord’s beautiful and holy name casually or to express anger, or by tearing some one down) . . . “In what we have done” (this area is easiest to understand) . . . “And in what we have failed to do” (what we call sins of omission--failing to love in a certain situation, or failing to help those in need).

Then we say three times while striking our breast: “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” St. Augustine, in explaining the gesture of beating our chest, uses the image of a rock that can be used to crush other objects. Our confession is like taking a rock in our hand to crush the sin in our own hearts.

And then we acknowledge the special love of Mary, the angels and the saints--they who are our true brothers and sisters in the Lord--whose love for us is always ready to express itself with prayers to God on our behalf. This is one of many moments the Mass when there is a clear connection between earth and heaven in the Mass--how they are united.

We follow our confession with a 3-fold plea for mercy: “Lord have Mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” Scripture and the Church like to work in ‘threes,’ which is a literary device that is used to give greater weight or emphasis to things that are very important: to emphasize God’s holiness, or the gravity of sin, or our need for mercy, etc.

The **Gloria** is a hymn of praise to God’s glory, sung by us, the people of God, who have experienced His mercy and redemption, and who continue to experience it on a daily basis. This is why it starts out as a litany--we are so grateful that we cannot find enough words to express our joy and gratitude: “We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you . . .” The Church has been using this hymn in the liturgy since the 5th century. It is a weaving together of several biblical titles for God and common expressions of praise that are found in scripture, and so it links our ‘praise of God’s glory’ to the praises sung throughout the centuries by God’s people, and even with heaven itself.

The first part comes from the celestial hymn sung by the angles to the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem--it is heavens joyful response to the announcement of Christ’s birth: “Glory

to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” Like Christmas, every Mass is a joyful celebration of Jesus Christ, truly come and present in the world--no longer as the little baby of Bethlehem, but now present sacramentally upon our altars in the gift of His Body and Blood, soul and divinity. Here again we have another clear moment where heaven and earth are joined together in the Mass.

Our praise of God is Trinitarian: first addressing God the Father, who is “almighty,” and our “heavenly king.” Here we joyfully acknowledge and accept His reign over our lives and the exercise of His power over us as a loving Father.

Then we turn to God, the only begotten Son of the Father. The name “Jesus Christ” refers to the mystery of the incarnation, the name that is given to the Son of God who takes on our human nature. The title “lamb of God” and His “taking away of our sins,” is taken from the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, which proclaims Christ’s triumphant victory over sin by his own death on the Cross. And His being “seated at the right hand of the Father,” speak of his resurrection and ascension into heaven, where he is enthroned at the right hand of the Father. There are several moments in the book of Revelation where all the heavenly hosts bow down in worship of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God--victor over sin, Satan and death. The Mass does not want us to forget the presence and nearness to us of these heavenly host in our praise and worship (this why there are often representations of angels in Church buildings - like our stain glass window above the altar).

After praising God by three other biblical titles, we end on another Trinitarian note, which includes our homage of the Holy Spirit.

Opening prayer, or Collect - expresses the theological character or theme of the feast or season of the liturgical year. It is, like all the prayers of Mass, trinitarian--a prayer addressed to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The collect is the voice of the Mystical Body of Christ, united with Christ her head, praising and petitioning the Father in the Holy Spirit. It is preceded by a moment of silence so that everyone present may offer their own personal, heart-felt petitions and intentions for the Mass. Then the priest, acting in the person of Christ the head, gathers and collects them all and offers them to God on behalf of all who are present--and the people give their assent of faith by their “Amen.” The Collect prayer encourages us to bring something to Mass, and not to offer an empty Mass--to bring a real, personal, concrete intention, which helps to make the whole Mass an act of love, offered on behalf of ourselves, our families and others who need God’s grace. This points us again to a principle that is always at work in the Liturgy: if we want to get something out of Mass, we must bring something to it.

We have already begun offering to God our sacrifice of praise. Now we continue to offer this sacrifice, while also offering the sacrifice of ourselves in union with the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon our altar, praying that our communion will truly make us holy in the image of Jesus Christ our Savior.