

Brothers and Sisters,

As you know, every parish in our diocese has been using the month of February to preach on the various parts of the Mass. The goal is to enrich our understanding of the liturgy, so that when we receive the 3rd Edition of the Roman Missal in November, we will have not only a new translation of the Mass, but a new appreciation of the liturgy as well.

Following the theology of one of my theological heroes, Swiss Theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, I have been talking about the Liturgy as a drama. Not some fictional work, mind you, but an exciting and emotional reality that takes place every time we gather for liturgy. It's dramatic because we see the infinite and all-powerful God, creator of everything, enter into relationship with human beings.

God does this in the Liturgy of the Word, where he speaks directly to us, gathered here at Peace of Christ at St. Ambrose. But that's just the beginning of the drama. The drama reaches its climax in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, where we celebrate the Eucharist as both meal and sacrifice.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the preparation of the Altar and presentation of the gifts. Notice the sacrificial imagery. We have an altar upon which to place our sacrifice, and we bring forward our gifts of sacrifice – bread and wine. These gifts represent the work of human beings (notice we don't bring forth the water). The gifts we bring forth are the fruit of our labor, and they are going to be given to God. At the same time, they are not only fruit of our labor, work of human hands, but they are also essential elements of a meal – food and drink, a meal we will soon share with God.

As the altar is prepared, you may have noticed that the priest mixes water with the wine. And I've been asked about that a lot. It's called the co-mingling rite. As I said earlier, water is not brought up with the gifts. And the reason is that water is not the work of human hands, but a gift from God, it's the created by God. By mixing the water and wine, we put forth in symbol the mingling of the human and divine. And the prayer the priest prays inaudibly also reflects this, as he says "By of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." It's such a small moment, but again we see the drama of the human and divine coming together. We recall that God became human so that our human nature could be divinized.

After the comingling rite, the priest, who is the mediator between humanity and God, offers the gifts, the fruit of our labor, as a sacrifice to God. And the people join him by praying that God accept this sacrifice.

Now we enter the summit of the Mass, the Eucharistic prayer. This is a prayer of thanksgiving (the word Eucharist means thanksgiving) as well as a prayer of sanctification, that is, it makes our sacrifice and ultimately it makes us Holy. The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving. By lifting your hearts to the Lord, you, as a congregation, unite yourself with the priest as he addresses the prayer to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The priest then begins the preface to the Eucharistic prayer. Listen to the words of the preface when we pray it. Listen as we express thanks to God. This prayer of thanks is important because it reminds us of the good God has done for us. Contemplating this good then moves us to join with the entire heavenly community – the saints and the

angels – and sing Gods praise *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus dominus deus sabaoth*, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts,” the same joyful hymn the Prophet Isaiah heard the Seraphim sing.

Now that we’re united not only with each other, but also with all the angels and saints, we enter into the heart of the Eucharistic prayer. During this prayer, the priest functions *in persona Christi capitis* – In the person of Christ the head. It is in this capacity that he re-presents Christ’s sacrifice on behalf of humanity. The priest invokes the Holy Spirit, asking the Spirit to make the gifts Holy, so that they can be transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, the sacrificial victim, in whose communion we will all partake.

It’s interesting to note that in this sacrifice, Christ is both the priest, that is He is the one who offers the sacrifice on behalf of humanity, and the victim who is to be sacrificed for the salvation of humanity. In this sacrifice we learn that our God does not look over us as a tyrannical Lord, rather He looks upon us with the love of a father who is willing to give everything for the sake of his children, even his own body and blood.

This is made evident in the institution narrative, where the priest recites the words of Christ at the last supper. This is the climax of the Mass during which we not only hear the words of Christ, “This is my Body, This is my Blood” but Christ truly becomes present. The bread and wine cease to exist, and are changed on the level of their substance. They are not transformed, their form is still that of bread and wine, but they are transubstantiated – their substance is no longer bread and wine, but the body and the blood of Christ. God, in the person of Christ, under the accidents of bread and wine is present on the altar of sacrifice. That is drama.

The Eucharistic prayer continues with the anamnesis, which is a Greek word that means to remember. But it’s more than a simple recollection; it’s a remembering that makes the past present once again. During the anamnesis, we call to mind Christ’s passion, His resurrection and His ascension into Heaven. We honor his command to, “do this in memory of me.”

We then take this holy, living and perfect sacrifice and offer it to God. However, it’s not just Christ we are offering. As the General instruction of the Roman Missal states, “The Church’s intention is...that the faithful...also learn to offer themselves, and so day by day to be consummated, through Christ the Mediator, into unity with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all.”

Now, of course we’re not only concerned for ourselves, but for those who have gone before us as well, so we pray for them, and only then do we lift this offering to God the Father, declaring that all glory, all honor belong to God forever and ever.

Our emphasis then turns more pointedly toward the meal aspect of the Eucharist. We stand and pray the Lords prayer, where we ask for our daily bread and for the forgiveness of our sins, of that which keeps us from God and one another. After praying that prayer, we ask for peace as a way of expressing our communion and mutual charity.

The body of Christ is broken, so that we can all participate in the one body (1 Cor 10:17) by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life, which is Christ, who died and rose for the salvation of the world. This is a gift that we then receive. Notice that we don’t take communion; we receive it. It’s a gift from God, which is why we don’t grab it

out of the minister's hands. Rather, we receive it in faith, as we say "Amen" to the prayer "the Body of Christ."

Brothers and sisters, peace to you and all who enter into the drama of the Eucharist.