

The celebration of the Eucharist: *Why is the Eucharist a 'communal' prayer and not a 'private' prayer?*

As disciples of Christ, we follow the exhortation of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, We are called to make our lives a living prayer, which means that all of our thoughts, words and actions should be intentional and rooted in an awareness of God's goodness. And as we pray, that vibrant dialogue of love with God is done in a variety of contexts, and the two most common are private prayer and communal prayer.

We move between moments when we pray privately and moments when we pray and act in common, as a family, with one heart and voice. That is what makes the common liturgy we celebrate so unique and wonderful. The Mass is and should be deeply personal but not private. But what does that mean?

In the Mass we all encounter the living God in a deeply personal way, and not just intellectually. So each gesture (kneeling, standing, genuflecting, sign of the cross, etc.) has a meaning and we should be conscious of what we are doing, not just acting unintentionally. Each response is also filled with meaning, and we respond in the Mass and other sacraments with 'one voice'. Our verbal responses, spoken and sung, should be done in communion with those around us, at the same pace, and with the same intention.

And even though in the context of the we have a personal encounter with the Lord, the Mass is not 'my' prayer in the sense that I can make my own responses, do my own postures or gestures, or have a different cadence in my responses. There may be a desire or temptation to keep my own pace with the responses or take on a posture that I prefer during Mass, but the communal prayer of the Mass brings us into a 'common' voice, a 'common' movement and a 'common' praise, and so it is distinct from my personal prayer time where I can be spontaneous or move in a way that suits me. There is a beautiful rhythm to the common celebration of every liturgy and Mass. We say 'common' because the Mass is a prayer that brings each of us into 'communion' with God and one another.

The beauty of the liturgy is that we all move through the prayer together, as one. For those who are not Catholic, it can almost seem too rigid or programmed at times, leaving no room for the Holy Spirit or spontaneity.

And I've heard the criticism and also the jokes that Catholics stand, sit, and kneel more than most people do during a workout at the local gym. But even for Catholics, when we are not intentional and fully participating, it can also become what I call 'static'. That is why the previous reflection on what it means to participate fully is important as a foundation. We need to be fully aware, intentional, and joyful about all of our prayer, and especially when we enter a 'common' prayer like the Mass.

As we enter any liturgy, but especially the Mass, we need to be aware and intentional that it is a 'communal prayer' and that our responses and our postures move together as one, as prescribed by the Church. One of the blessings to the 'common' dimension of our prayer at Mass is that we can sense that we are not alone, that we are surrounded by a vibrant, praying community, and even more, the communion of saints who surround us. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us, while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. (Heb. 12: 1-2)

Each form of prayer has its own depth and richness, its own dignity and proper place in our life as disciples, but the Mass as a common prayer draws us into the mystery of Divine life through shared prayers, gestures, and songs that rise up to God as a unified, family prayer.

1. How do the postures connect to the eternal mystery unfolding in each moment of the Mass?
2. In what ways do I engage in the Mass as a communal prayer, unifying my heart and mind with the congregation, Church, and Communion of Saints ?
3. In what moments of the Mass can I grow in understanding and awareness of the communal dimension of prayer?

Resources

For additional reading, please see Sacrosanctum Concilium, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from the Second Vatican Council. In

paragraphs 26 and 27 the Council Fathers write:

Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the "sacrament of unity," namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops

Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it; but they concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their differing rank, office, and actual participation.

It is to be stressed that whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private.

This applies with special force to the celebration of Mass and the administration of the sacraments, even though every Mass has of itself a public and social nature.