

Eucharist, Anchor of My Prayer Life



Prayer, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, is the “vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (2558). Prayer can happen anywhere, and at any time. In the celebration of the Eucharist, however, we pray in an incomparable way.

JESUS TEACHES US TO PRAY

Jesus modeled prayer. Throughout his earthly life, his intimate and loving relationship with God the Father could be seen by how he prayed. His disciples witnessed him praising and thanking God and calling upon “Abba,” his heavenly Father, for help. Frequently he took time to go to “a lonely place” and pray. He also went to the synagogue and the Temple, and shared in the prayerful rituals of the Jewish people.

Jesus formed his followers in the way of prayer. He urged them to be persistent in prayer and to avoid showing off their piety to gain recognition from others. He taught them that humility is essential to prayer. They were to use few words, but pray from the heart. When his disciples asked him, “Teach us to pray,” Jesus gave them the Lord’s Prayer—the touchstone of all Christian prayer.

Before his Passion and death, Jesus spent the night in intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. From the Cross, he cried out in the words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” These words of prayer from the Scriptures carried his anguish to God at the moment of his greatest pain and desolation.

After the Resurrection, the two disciples at Emmaus recognized Jesus as he “said the blessing” and broke the bread. Through this simple ritual of blessing the food they were about to eat, they knew him as the Risen Christ.

What does the example and teaching of Jesus on prayer show us about Eucharist?

THREE LESSONS FOR OUR PRAYER

First of all, *Eucharist cannot be the sum total of our prayer*. Just as Jesus went to “a lonely place” to pray, and recommended that his disciples spend time praying “in secret,” so we must continue to find time, outside of Mass, for personal prayer. In moments of immense suffering and times of great joy, passionate prayer may arise spontaneously. At other times, habits of prayer help us to remain attuned to God’s nearness and care for us.

Nevertheless, Jesus also treasured ritual prayer, communal prayer. Regular ritual prayer was part of the very fabric of his life, as it continues to be part of ours as Catholics. In the Eucharist we remember what Jesus said and did at a ritual meal—the Last Supper. Thus, second: *private personal prayer is no substitute for liturgy*. Sometimes one hears people say “I can pray at home. Why should I go to Mass?” Such an attitude finds no basis in the life of Jesus. Indeed, we encounter Jesus, as Risen Lord, when we break the bread of Eucharist.

Third, the prayerful approach to Eucharist is one of *heartfelt humility as we enter into the presence of God*. The movements of prayer found in the Mass—praising and adoring God, praying for our own needs or the needs of others, offering

thanks, or responding with gratitude after receiving Holy Communion—flow most freely when they are prayed with a humble heart.

PRAYER AS GIFT

St. Paul urged the community of believers to “pray constantly” and pointed to the action of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to pray. When we cannot pray, or do not know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us (see Romans 8:26-27). Such confidence in God’s initiative and God’s empowering role in our prayer has enabled Christians through the centuries to regard prayer as a gift. Even as we practice disciplines of prayer and strive to be constant and faithful in prayer, we know this would be useless if God did not desire a relationship with us first.

“The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depth of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2560).

EUCHARIST, THE SACRAMENT OF CHRIST’S PRESENCE

The Eucharist is the great liturgical prayer of the Church. Within the celebration, the sacrament of Christ’s presence, offered and received in Holy Communion, can have a profound effect on our whole life of prayer.

What happens when we receive Holy Communion? On the physical level we have eaten a bit of bread and taken a sip of wine from a common cup. Yet in faith we believe something more profound has taken place: the Risen Christ comes to us. The living and true God has given himself to us. God has taken the initiative. When we receive the Eucharist in faith, we respond to that initiative, saying yes: “Amen.”

The Eucharist anchors us each week, or even daily if that is our practice, in what is most important in life: our relationship with the Risen Lord. He continually seeks us. Despite our sins, he longs to “enter our house” and dwell with us. It says in the Book of Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). And when we leave Mass strengthened in faith, we have confidence that the Spirit of the Risen Lord, whom we have encountered in the Eucharist, will continue to guide and strengthen us each day of the week.

REFLECT

What moment in the liturgy do you find most prayerful? When you say “Amen” to the body and blood of Christ, what does that mean to you?

ACT

Take a few moments to pray before and after Mass. By preparing to celebrate Eucharist, we allow the celebration to blossom. After Mass, take a moment to be thankful for the ways you have experienced Christ’s presence in the liturgy.

PRAY

Loving God, thank you for giving us the Eucharist to anchor all our prayer in the gift of Jesus. Open my heart to a deeper relationship with him. Help us, through the Holy Spirit, to experience your nearness and say “Amen” to the life you alone can give.

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